

Mapping:

The Trash-Tier Skill

✕ That Got Me Into a

Top-Tier Party

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VISIT...

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The New Ace of the Arrivers

Fame, fortune, magic, wisdom... Endless treasure and bounty lay within the otherworldly depths of the land—depths yet to be conquered that beckon people with the intangible power of curiosity. Be it in the name of hopes and dreams or greed and self-interest, adventurers from all walks of life risked everything to challenge the dungeons.

One of many daring groups was the Arrivers, our party who once held the remarkable claim of being the closest to actually clearing a dungeon. With five top-tier adventurers in their respective fields and me, our navigator with Mapping, we conquered one impenetrable floor after another. We soon broke the record for furthest floor reached in the Dungeon of Puriff, yet our smooth sailing was doomed to come to an abrupt end.

Jin, the backbone of the party, lost his life in a tragic turn of events on floor 21. The other members soon left town one after another, effectively disbanding the party. I too decided to retire from adventuring, but found myself unable to forget the glory of our heyday.

And so I gathered up our scattered members and reformed the Arrivers. After resolving challenge upon challenge that had stood in our way, the five of us were finally ready to get back in the dungeon. But...

“What should we do about this...?”

There was one last problem keeping us out of action—we were a member short. Boss rooms in the dungeon normally allowed a maximum of six people to enter at once, so that was naturally considered the ideal party size. But with Jin gone, the Arrivers were only five strong.

A year ago, the Arrivers had been unable to conquer floor 21. Our lack of offensive power was a major contributing factor in our failure, and despite the fact that we’d all grown stronger since, there was still no point in challenging the dungeon with just the five of us. In other words, we had to find our number six.

The warp crystals on each floor of the dungeon would only transport users to floors they'd reached before. That meant onboarding a new member would involve getting them through every floor we'd already cleared so far, essentially doubling the work. And for that reason, we had decided to make finding a capable sixth member the new Arrivers' top priority.

We'd posted a recruitment advertisement at the dungeon guild a week ago, and now we had a mountain of applications to sort through. They detailed each potential recruit's name, role, skillset, career history, and any other notable features of interest—these were the points we'd inquired about in our wanted ad.

Although the Arrivers hadn't been active for the past year, we were once the front-running dungeon party in town. Our reputation preceded us to this day, so we'd received a ton of applications. I'm not sure how word had spread, but we even had them coming in from other cities. Now, having a large pool of candidates to choose from wasn't a bad thing, but there's such a thing as *too* much. We were never going to get through all of these...

"There were even more in the mailbox," Roslia reported as she came inside. Roslia was our paladin and tank, wielder of the Holy Sword Fractus. She was once feared throughout Puriff as a partywrecker, but she eventually came to settle down with the Arrivers. She placed a bundle of envelopes on the table, along with the groceries she'd brought home from shopping.

That added another ten candidates to the pool. We'd just finished sorting all the applications we'd received so far, but now it was back to work for us... I wanted to sigh, but this wasn't Roslia's fault. In fact, I should've thanked her for checking the mail. I split the bundle of envelopes in two and handed half to the silver-haired girl sitting next to me.

"I'm exhausted, Note..."

This whiner was Erin Fortlord, our mage and the talk of the country right now. Why, you ask? She'd beat out the favorite to win at the Seventh Sage Selection only to withdraw from the competition and walk away from it all. Why, you ask? Well, it was mainly because of me, but I tried not to think about that part too much. I still felt kinda bad about it.

“C’mon, let’s take a break. Roslia brought food,” she suggested, slumping listlessly over the table.

I’d just been thinking about taking a break myself, honestly. We both eagerly reached for the grocery bags Roslia had left on the table, only for her to smack Erin’s hand away.

“These are ingredients for tonight’s dinner! No snitching,” she barked.

“Okay, but...” Erin made a displeased face. “Why are you only fussing at me? What about Note?” Her gaze was fixed on my bread-stuffed cheeks.

Roslia cleared her throat and looked straight at Erin as she continued, “Eating before dinner is a bad habit, Erin.”

“But why am I the only one in trouble?!”

“Just because other people are doing it doesn’t make it okay for you to do it too.”

“That’s valid, but you need to stop Note already! He’s going for seconds!”

“Do you want some, Miss Neme?”

“Yes, please!”

“And now he’s sharing with other people! Are you going to stand for that, Roslia?!”

“I’m scolding *you* right now, Erin! Don’t try to change the subject!”

“Again, why me?!”

Seeing Erin and Roslia bicker like this was old hat around here. There was no point in reacting to it. If anything, it was actually kind of heartwarming. I mean, they mainly bickered because of me, but I tried not to think about that part too much. I knew I was really to blame.

For the record, the little girl happily munching on bread I’d given her was Neme Pargin, our priestess. She both looked and acted like a child, but she was actually older than me. She’d gained some younger adventurer fans of late, though, so it was fair to say she was maturing. There was finally some hope for our party mascot.

“Want some too, Force?” I offered.

“No way. Not even I could eat right now... Don’t you feel sorry for Erin?” he responded by saying something considerate for once. Shocking.

Force, the man still diligently going through the pile of applications, was our leader. He was an irresponsible skirt-chaser not long ago, but he’d recently developed some common sense that the party was otherwise sorely lacking. No, really, what had happened to him? I was pretty sure this was the first time he’d *ever* shown concern for Erin.

“How does it look? Anyone promising?” I asked.

“Nah. They all leave something to be desired.” He tossed the papers in his hand back on the table and sighed. “All of the applicants we’ve gotten are mid-rank adventurers. None of them even have any particularly good skills...”

A person’s lot in life was largely determined by their skills—abilities divinely granted to them. One glance at someone’s skillset could tell you a great deal about their potential as an adventurer. I used to worry that mine would never cut it in combat, yet here I was now judging others for their skills. How ironic.

Of course, I’d come to learn that skills weren’t everything. There were obviously adventurers out there like Jin, who compensated for his skills with other talents and techniques. Still, looking at someone’s skillset was a quick and dirty way to get a read on them. We made sure to factor in applicants’ career histories and other merits before making a final call, but it was evident at this point that Jin had truly been in a league of his own.

In reality, there weren’t many top-tier adventurers around to apply in the first place. The best of the best were already members of other parties. They weren’t going to shirk their current affiliations just to join up with us. If that’s what we’d been hoping for, we should’ve been scouting instead of fielding applications. We should’ve been taking direct action instead of waiting passively.

But at present, the Arrivers didn’t have the personnel or funds for headhunting. If someone that good was interested in switching teams, they’d be better off seeking out another dungeon party in terms of benefits and pay. In the year we’d been on hiatus, both the Labyrinth Knights and Liberation had

broken the Arrivers' furthest-floor record. All the ambitious adventurers in town had already joined up with them.

"I've managed to narrow it down to two, maybe three people... But it feels like I'm settling," said Force. "I'd really prefer to pick someone that makes me go, 'This is the one!'"

"I agree. If we're going to get past floor 21, we need the best candidate possible. We can't afford to settle here."

We knew exactly how deadly the dungeon could be. Even with Jin at our side, we'd gotten crushed on floor 21. That was a mistake we could never take back, and one I never cared to repeat. To that end, we couldn't compromise on our sixth member.

"I guess I'll put the candidates I just picked out in the no pile, then," Force continued. "We'll hold off until we find a new member that feels right."

"Yeah, I think that's for the best."

I felt bad for turning so many people down, but we were going to pass on this round of applicants. I was certain none of them wanted to throw their lives away in the end floors of the dungeon either. If we picked someone half-heartedly at this juncture, it would hurt us all.

"Then it's a plan. Maybe some fresh-faced fifteen-year-old will get some incredible skill from their presentation ceremony soon. We can always take on a total newbie," Roslia suggested.

"Come to think of it, Roslia," Force said, stretching his arms and sighing, "did you get the paperwork taken care of?"

"Sure did! We're all set." You see, Roslia hadn't just gone out shopping. She'd taken care of another important errand for us too. "I turned in everything to the guild, so we're clear to go dungeon diving again."

Dungeoneering may seem like a chaotic endeavor, but there were actually a lot of regulations in place. One such regulation required every dungeon party to register with the guild and go through an approval process before they were allowed to enter the dungeon. The system existed to protect the adventurers themselves.

Adding a new member to the party wasn't cause enough to reinitiate the process, but reuniting a previously disbanded party was a different story. The paperwork had been what was holding us back from the dungeon now that we were all together again. Neme was the only one of us exempt from it, as she'd continued to dive with the Ultimate Invincible Partyz all this time.

"Welp, shall we go for our first dungeon romp in a while?" Force suggested.

"Sounds good to me," I readily agreed.

After several days of nothing but sitting and staring at applications, I was feeling stiff. I was plenty anxious to get out and move around some. More than that, I was anxious to find out just how much everyone had grown over the past year. Force had honed his blade in Swordmaster's Sanctuary. Neme had formed and led her own party while learning how to be a better priestess. And Erin had reached the pinnacle of magehood by dominating the Seventh Sage Selection. I really wanted to see what they could all do firsthand.

"I'm in!" chimed Roslia.

"Gosh, you're so hasty. But I'm in too," Erin put forward reluctantly.

"Neme wants to be included as well," our tiny priestess piped up.

"Then let's get ready," Force commanded. "While we're at it, we should have a little contest to see who's gotten the strongest."

*

"Uhhh... I know I suggested a contest, but..." Force stammered.

He and I both were standing stock-still in slack-jawed awe. Pretty much everyone else was in a similar state of stupor. Everyone but the cause of all this.

"What?" the culprit said casually as she glanced over her shoulder.

It was none other than our party mage, Erin Fortlord. But her reaction really didn't do justice to the spectacle she'd just put on. You see, we were currently on floor 16. The very same floor 16 where we'd once struggled against wave after wave of a horseman army.

Except now, the entire floor had been wiped out by a single one of us. Every last monster in the town area was defeated, and we were now surrounded by a

burning wasteland. Erin's rapid-fire barrage of insanely powerful magic had reduced the town to ash.

What... What is this? She's way too overpowered. Completely broken.

I knew that Erin had practically limitless magical energy, but her training in the magic city had given her the stamina to put it to good use. She could now continuously cast a wide variety of spells she'd mastered. And the result? She was able to conquer floor 16 single-handedly. Clearing one of the later middle floors solo was virtually unheard of. A back-line mage doing it had to be unprecedented.

Honestly, Erin's power surpassed all reason. She'd already proven she was one of the top seven mages in the nation, but this was on a whole other level. Forget the country. I would've been surprised if there was any mage stronger than her in the entire world.

That was something I'd only come to understand after seeing her perform outside of the limited rules of the Seventh Sage Selection. In the dungeon, she had free rein to fight as she pleased. She *was* the pinnacle of magehood, and the most terrifying thing of all was that she still had room to grow. Erin was now the MVP of the Arrivers. With her, reaching floor 30 was no longer a pipe dream. The question was whether or not she realized that for herself...

"After defeating this many enemies, can we just say I win?" she asked.

Erin had introduced herself to me by saying she'd become the best mage in the world, and now she was frighteningly close to that goal. She'd later admitted while we were fighting for our lives on floor 20 that it was just bluster, yet here she was... Her delusions were becoming reality.

"Yeah, you win..." Force conceded. Even he was overwhelmed.

With the exception of me, the Arrivers were all best in class when it came to their respective battle styles. Everyone played a different role, but their individual strengths within the party were pretty clear-cut. Force and Jin had always dominated, followed by Erin and Roslia. (Neme didn't rank because, as our healer, she didn't fight.)



But that order had since changed. I couldn't say for certain without seeing Force go all out, but I was pretty sure he now took second place behind our mage. Indeed, the Arrivers had themselves a new ace. The party once famous for Force and Jin's handiwork would soon be spearheaded by Erin.

This was going to shake up our strategy in finding a new member. Because I'd gained some competence on the front line, we'd been considering finding another back-line attacker. But with our firepower now concentrated in the rear, we'd be better balanced if we added to our front-line team. I had the feeling that our expeditions on future floors would go as smoothly as possible if we built our party around Erin.

"What do you want to do? Shall we hit the boss room?" I asked Force.

He shook his head and replied, "What's the point? Erin would just steal the kill again."

"Yeah, you're right. There aren't any other monsters left here, so let's move to a new floor."

The Other Navigator

Until we secured our sixth member, the Arrivers couldn't progress in the dungeon. As such, we decided on three intermediate goals to pursue. First was searching out potential candidates. We'd hoped to find someone promising by having an open application, but that hadn't yielded any results. So instead, we were turning our efforts to scouting.

The job fell to the party member with the most connections—Force. I'm not saying he had an incredible network or anything, but he was better suited for the task than the rest of us. Erin had zero friends, Roslia had her infamy, Neme was shy, and I was basically still the new guy in town. Yeah, there was pretty much no contest... I mean, Force *had* lived in Puriff the longest and he *did* have a considerable number of male friends. And with his personality now, he wouldn't just try to pick up the first cute girl he saw. I figured it was safe to leave the task to him.

Our second goal was replenishing our coffers. Since we'd been apart for a year, our funds were spent and we had squat to speak of for income. That had to change since we'd need capital to scout a new member, so we decided to put together a detachment to raid the dungeon for sellable loot.

This assignment fell to Erin and Roslia. Erin had the power to blast through most any monster, and Roslia had the defenses to lure them together and act as a shield. They were the ideal tag team, perfectly capable of handling the middle floors together. To prepare, Erin was currently learning monster and trap detection magic. While she couldn't cast both spells at the same time, she should be able to stay abreast of any and all threats by using them in turn.

My biggest worry was how the girls were going to get along. Sending Erin and Roslia off into the dungeon alone together was kind of scary, you know? They were always at each other's throats, but surely they'd lay off when their lives depended on it, right? *Right?*

Our third goal was essentially figuring out how to run a dungeoneering party.

Jin used to manage everything for us, so, candidly speaking, we were in pretty dire straits. What kind of supplies did we need? How did we account for resources? There was just so much we didn't know. Relying entirely on Jin had come back to bite us.

Our solution for this was to ask another dungeon party to teach us the ropes. And by process of elimination, that task fell on me. Neme was available, but she was still painfully shy (despite her claims to the contrary) and therefore poorly suited to such a social job. Erin and Roslia were more than enough on their money-making raids too, so the party priestess was basically off the hook for the time being. She was spending her free time with the Ultimate Invincible Partyz, so a little more of it wouldn't hurt.

Anyway, that's why I was headed to visit a different party today—the biggest one in town, in fact. The Labyrinth Knights had so many members that they were more like an alliance of several parties. Their vanguard currently held the record for second-furthest floor cleared at floor 22. Ahead of them was Puriff's party of veteran adventurers, Liberation, who'd cleared through floor 23.

Both parties had safely conquered floor 21 with what they'd learned from our tragedy, but I knew it couldn't have been an easy feat without holy arts. It was possible they were just that much stronger than the Arrivers. We had Erin, meaning we had all the firepower we could ever need, but we still couldn't come up with a solid strategy to get through floor 21. How we played our cards would depend entirely on what our sixth member could do.

I spotted the large building I was looking for on the main road. The signboard spelled it out for me—this was the Labyrinth Knights' headquarters. The entrance was a double door, wide open and welcoming. I walked inside to find a reception counter. When I told the clerk my business there, she asked me to wait while she paged their boss.

I almost feel like I'm visiting some kind of company. Should we be running the Arrivers like this? Not that we usually get visitors at HQ...

After a couple of minutes, the door in the back of the reception hall opened to reveal a black-haired man known to all of Puriff. This was the leader of the Labyrinth Knights, Reisch Mistray the Thunderspear. He was the top spearman

in the country thanks to his Superior Spear Mastery skill.

“Hello there. Sorry for making you wait,” he greeted me in a calm voice. He sounded gentle and wise, but his imposing stature and physique gave him a certain intensity. He practically radiated strength. “I understand you wish to learn about party management. Is that correct?”

“Yes, that’s correct.”

I had made my request of the Labyrinth Knights in advance. Of course, I wasn’t asking them to teach me for free.

“And in exchange, you’ll assist our parties on expeditions?”

“Yes. I have some free time as my party searches for a new member, so I can help out as much as you need.”

Navigators with Mapping were extremely useful for dungeoneering. We were naturally helpful on new floors, but we could also dramatically increase exploration efficiency on previously cleared floors.

“Understood. Incidentally, there’s someone I’d like to introduce you to,” Reisch said. “Would you mind?”

“Huh? Is it someone I know?”

“I doubt you know him, although you may have heard of him before. He’s the new rising star of our party.”

No sooner had Reisch said those words than someone peeked through the door behind him. It was a blond boy who was on the short side and had an attractive, androgynous face. Frankly, he was stunning.

“Hello, Master Note!” he declared, leaping closer to me. “I’ve always wanted to meet you!”

“‘Master’?”

Since when did I have a pupil? There weren’t any kids younger than me back home, so that couldn’t be it. Had I met him during my party-hopping days, then? No, I’d remember someone that good-looking...

“Oh, sorry! Of course me calling you that would confuse you since we’ve

never met and all, but I just can't help myself. I'm a huge fan of yours!"

So it's finally my turn to have fans, huh?

Even though I'd joined up with the Arrivers, I'd never tasted any of the popularity they enjoyed. No surprise there, though. To anyone who didn't know the value of Mapping, I was just your average Joe hanging with dungeon-diving royalty. And I couldn't deny it either. I mean, it was the truth.

"Thanks, I guess?"

I accepted the boy's handshake somewhat bashfully. It was a little embarrassing to be thrust into the spotlight like this. I had to hope I wasn't making a weird face.

"You're the reason I became an adventurer!" the boy insisted.

Huh?! Wasn't that, like, a lot?! I didn't realize he meant he was a superfan! Was I supposed to give him my autograph or something? I'd never considered signing something for someone before... Could I just write my name and go with that?

"Wow, thanks. I'm flattered, really," I mustered.

"No, I'm the one who should be thanking you! I even got to shake your hand! I can't believe you're so nice, Master!" he gushed.

"Speaking of, why *are* you calling me that?" I had to ask.

I'd been wondering as much since he first jumped in the room. Was he just being super polite since I was older? Well, I suppose I *had* gotten a bit taller. Maybe this was how most newbies treated their senior adventurers.

"Come to think of it, I got so excited that I haven't even introduced myself! I'm the newest Labyrinth Knight, Courie Louison. But I guess that still doesn't explain things, huh?" Courie rambled on, "Let me put it this way, then: I also have the Mapping skill, Master Note."

"You have Mapping...?"

That's when it hit me.

Mapping's usefulness in the dungeon was no longer an Arrivers-exclusive

secret. Back when Erin and I were trapped on floor 20, Jin had traded intel to other parties in exchange for their help in the search and rescue effort. Erin and I ultimately escaped on our own, but since then, the Labyrinth Knights had taken what they'd learned and put it to good use—that is, investing heavily in recruiting a Mapping member of their own. Or so I'd heard. It seemed all their efforts had paid off too, for here I was, standing face-to-face with the only other Mapping navigator in town.



The Labyrinth Knights were already serious competition for the Arrivers, and it was clear they'd only picked up speed since finding Courie. They'd cleared floor 21, which had stopped us cold in our tracks. We'd need to keep a close eye on them in the future. In the time it took us to find our sixth member, they could potentially conquer the entire dungeon.

"So that's what you meant when you said I was the reason you became an adventurer, huh?" I asked, finally connecting the dots in my head.

"That's right!" Courie replied. "Because of you, everyone knows how great Mapping is now! That's why the Labyrinth Knights picked me up and everything. You're like a hero to everyone out there with Mapping, although it's such a rare skill, I don't actually know anyone other than us."

My involvement in all this was rather indirect, but I understood where Courie was coming from. In society's eyes, Mapping was garbage. It had niche uses that were incompatible with ambitions like becoming an adventurer or a knight. But now, thanks to my role in the Arrivers, Mapping users finally had something to aspire to. At long last, they had a reason to dream big. To Courie, it probably looked like I'd paved the way for him and others like us. Yet in reality, Jin was the one who'd opened that door for *me*. I'd hardly done anything myself.

"Man, I can't believe it! I'm so glad I got a chance to meet you, Master!"

"Have you had enough now?" Reisch said, finally putting a lid on Courie's tireless excitement. "If so, let's get back to business."

"Oh, right. I was so wrapped up in talking with Master that I completely forgot about you, Reisch."

"You *forgot* about your party leader?" Reisch sighed.

"I sort of get tunnel vision when I fixate on something. Bad habit, ha ha ha."

"What're you laughing for?" Reisch asked with another heavy sigh, exasperated by Courie's lack of remorse.

"Well, don't mind me. I'll pipe down while you discuss things," Courie continued. "Oh, but can I talk to Master more when you're done?"

"I don't see why not."

“Yay! In that case, I’ll be waiting. But I’m impatient, so please make it quick!”

Courie seemed to be a pretty free spirit. He moved at his own pace—meaning, of course, that he dragged other people along for the ride. It was clear he meant well, however, so I didn’t mind so much.

“All right, all right. Well then, Note...” Reisch turned back to me and cleared his throat. “Can I assign you to our B-team? They’re on floor 17. The vanguard—our A-team—has Courie, so they’re doing just fine, but our B-team has stalled out a bit. Can you lend them a hand?”

“Sure, I can do that.”

Their so-called “B-team” had “stalled out” on floor 17? Seriously? I had a few comments about that but chose to keep them to myself. Floor 17 was a milestone for the Arrivers after I joined up with them, yet it wasn’t considered satisfactory progress to the Labyrinth Knights... These people had to be on another level.

“Our B-team is led by a girl named Pisha. She can teach you anything you want to learn about dungeoneering know-how.”

“Hang on!” Courie interrupted. So much for piping down. He’d hardly been quiet a minute. “I don’t get to go dungeon diving with Master? Assign him to the vanguard instead!”

Reisch shrugged and replied, “There’s no reason for him to come with us, though.”

“There’s plenty of reason! Didn’t you say yourself that you wanted to see what the strongest navigator could do, Reisch?”

“Ha ha, yeah. I guess I did say that.”

That’s a free spirit for you, I guess. This seemed like it was all fun and games to Courie.

“Pretty please! Just once! Please let Note come with us! I’m sure it’ll be worthwhile. You want to see our A-team in action too, right, Note?”

“I guess...”

Part of me really was curious. I’d never witnessed another party clear a floor

before, and more than anything, I wanted the chance to see the legendary Thunderspear fight. I was also intrigued by what tricks their newest member might have up his sleeve.

“You heard him! C’mon, Reisch! Let’s take him with us!” he begged.

“No matter what you say—”

“I wanna see how Master fights in the dungeon! I might even get some inspiration from it— No, I *know* I will! I’ll be positively bursting with ideas!”

“There’s just no stopping him when he gets like this...” Reisch sighed, pressing a hand to his forehead. Sure seemed like he had it rough. The wrinkles on his brow were getting more defined by the second. “Just this once, okay?” he finally conceded.

“Yay! I knew you were the best, Reisch!”

“Spare me the flattery. This is only because I know you won’t take no for an answer. You need to learn how to compromise.”

“Yeah, I get that a lot!” Courie cheered with a fistpump.

“You know...that *wasn’t* a compliment,” Reisch sighed again with an exhausted expression.

The Labyrinth Knights were the biggest dungeon-diving group in Puriff. I rendezvoused with their vanguard as we set out for floor 18, which was covered in massive trees that towered over us at a dozen times the height of any human.

See, everything on this floor was giant. The landscape was enormous, and so were the monsters that inhabited it. Almost all the mobs here were big enough to kill someone just by stepping on them. The mid-boss was easily mistaken for a mountain. I remember being flabbergasted the first time I challenged it with the Arrivers.

And now I was here to do it again with five others: the leader of the Labyrinth Knights, Thunderspear Reisch Mistray; the up-and-coming navigator, Courie Louison; the swordsman known for being the best tank around, Living Dead

Blaeu; their star priestess who regularly topped the adventurer popularity charts in town; and a cringey black mage, the self-styled “Shadow’s End.” These five adventurers were the Labyrinth Knights’ vanguard—the best their party had to offer. Their names were all well known on the streets of Puriff. There was a sixth member, a spirit swordsman, who was normally among their ranks, but I was taking their spot for the day.

“So Courie’s a mage? Huh,” I casually remarked to the priestess walking next to me.

“That’s right!” she replied with a cheerful grin. “You didn’t know?”

“Can’t say I did. I’d never heard of him before today.”

I glanced over at Courie, who was now dressed in a white robe. He had a short wand in his right hand, which he was idly twirling around like a pen. When he noticed me looking at him, he came running over like a puppy.

“Do you need me for something, Master Note?!”

“I just didn’t realize you were a mage.”

“Sure am! Don’t I look the part?”

“You weren’t in your gear earlier, so I couldn’t tell. But now that you mention it, you are on the slimmer side, so I suppose you do kinda look like a mage.”

“Really? I come from a family of mages, you know!”

“Ever been to Izaar before?”

“Yep, that’s my hometown! I’m a born and raised Izaarian.”

“Yeah? I was there just the other day.”

“I know. *Everyone* knows! That stunt you pulled was just iconic. I read all about it in the papers.”

So even Courie had heard, huh? I suppose that was only natural given what had happened, but I was still having a hard time swallowing the fact that news about me was spreading across the country.

“Let’s not go there...” I muttered.

“Aww, but I have so many questions!” Courie objected. “Are you and Erin an

item? You've gotta be popular with the ladies, right?"

"We're not an item, and I'm not popular. What makes you think that?"

"You're so cool, Master! You should just go for it. Make the first move and you'll have the ladies on their knees."

"Why do you think so much of me again...? Anyway, aren't you the popular one here? What with that face of yours and all."

Courie was a pretty boy. He had blue eyes and a youthful, expressive countenance. Every emotion that crossed his face only accentuated his charm further.

"Well, I suppose I *am* pretty popular," he said.

"Not denying it, huh?"

"But it's the truth. If I tried to deny it out of modesty, that'd be irritating, wouldn't it? I think it's better just to be real about it."

"Is that how this works...?"

I had some reservations on that front, but there really wasn't any conceit in what he said. It was kind of refreshing. As I was turning this all over in my head...

"Watch yourself," the priestess walking next to us warned me. "This kid may look innocent, but he's already laid hands on a dozen or more girls in town. He might snatch up whoever you're interested in too if you're not careful."

"Huh?!"

"Well, she's not wrong," Courie said matter-of-factly. "But that wasn't a nice way to put it. The girls I sleep with always approach me first. I mean, it's a waste not to eat a meal set before you, right? No need to make me sound like some kind of incubus."

"Wait, the girls you *sleep with*?!"

"What's that dramatic reaction for? It's not like I'm a virgin."

Yeah, well, sorry, kid. I am.

He'd unknowingly landed one hell of a blow on me. Nothing hurts more than

having a younger guy poke fun at your lack of action.

“Chin up, buddy,” the priestess said sympathetically, patting me on the shoulder. She’d apparently seen right through me.

And just so you know, being pitied by a woman for your lack of action can sting just as bad. Kindness can kill sometimes. Remember that.

“Anyway, should we really just be casually chatting like this?” I asked, desperate to change the subject and spare myself any more pain. “Shouldn’t you be navigating, Courie?”

None the wiser, he waved his hand and replied with an innocent smile, “It’s fine. We haven’t wandered off course and there aren’t any monsters nearby.”

“True, but— Wait, you can keep track of monsters too?”

“I’m using Detection, a spell similar to your Enemy Search. I might seem irresponsible, but I do my job right. Don’t worry,” Courie answered while deftly spinning his wand between his index, middle, and ring fingers. “Using your style as a foundation, I mastered specific spells to help me support the party. Detecting monsters and dismantling traps are my fortes—I’m basically a magic version of you.”

A magic version of me...?

As someone who’d recently transitioned into a magic-based combat style with help from Erin, I had to admit that those words piqued my interest. Maybe I could learn something from watching Courie. How would a mage with no combat abilities take on the dungeon? I couldn’t wait to find out.

“Since we’re here, I want to try fighting alongside Master. Where’re all the monsters?” Courie mumbled to himself, then turned to Reisch at the front of the group. “Reisch! I wanna fight baddies! Can I call some here?”

“I suppose just walking through the floor is a bit boring...but we also don’t have our usual team. As long as you avoid consecutive battles, you can—”

“Yay! Let’s get the party started!”

“Hey, are you listening—”

Before Reisch could even finish, Courie leaped forward. He then took a

second wand from his belt and started spinning it in his right hand too.

“Magic Missile!” he called.

At that, bolts of magical energy flew forth from his wand—six in total. Each spun just like his wand as they rose into the air, and when they got high enough, they burst in every direction. A moment later, an explosion could be heard in the distance.

“Yay, bull’s-eye! See, I can lure the monsters here by casting consecutive shots like this. All right, Blaeu, you’re up! The first one should be coming from ten o’clock.”

As he spoke, Courie continued to fire Magic Missiles into the air. Multiple darts of light shot forward from his wand in orderly fashion. The mix of geometrical lines and aesthetic curves they traced was an artful sight to behold.

“Wow...” I found myself muttering in awe.

Magic Missile wasn’t a particularly impressive spell in and of itself. If anything, shooting magical energy in the form of a projectile was the most basic of spellcasting basics. But I’d never seen a mage manipulate Magic Missile with this kind of precision before.

The next round of magical bolts disappeared into the great overgrown forest around us. Within seconds, the number of hostile monsters in the area increased dramatically. Courie must have scored a hit...on every last one of them. There was no way this was normal.

Part of his technique had to be Mapping. Having a mental map of the area would be critical to this kind of long-distance spellcasting. But even then, there was no way he could pull it off without complete and absolute mastery of his magic. Especially not against naturally moving targets like monsters. While controlling his spell, Courie had to be predicting where the mobs would run.

“Here they come! As promised, the first one’s on your ten!” he shouted, prompting Blaeu to action.

The party tank shot toward the enormous deer like a bullet. He drew his weapon—The Drowned, a longsword that could cut anything when submerged in water—from his back and bent forward to slash at the cervine monster’s legs.

It sensed the impending danger, jumping high to avoid The Drowned as it slashed through empty air.

The antlers on its head then began glowing. The next moment, a bolt of lightning sprung at Blaeu—who continued his charge, swinging his sword without sparing a moment's attention to the incoming attack. And strangely enough, the lightning passed right by as if avoiding him. It was no small wonder how he hadn't been hit yet. The man left himself completely open, utterly unguarded. He risked death at every moment, but focused on nothing but pressing the offensive.

This was how Blaeu had earned the nickname "Living Dead." With the way he fought, his life was perpetually hanging in the balance. And yet somehow, he made it out alive every time. It was almost like he was under some sort of divine protection.

This all-offense combat style was Blaeu's signature. I'd heard it was something he developed after joining up with the Labyrinth Knights. Before then, he was just a normal fighter who was part of a normal party. Then one day, tragedy struck and his teammates were all wiped out by a monster. After that, he started dungeon diving solo with a death wish.

He challenged formidable foe after formidable foe in hopes of being reunited with his fallen comrades, but he walked away from each fight victorious. No matter how doggedly he pursued death, it eluded him at every turn. For some strange reason, the monsters he fought could never land a hit on him. This, people said, was how he'd come to evolve.

Eventually, Reisch set his sights on the fighter who just wouldn't die and invited him to join the Labyrinth Knights. Hoping the furthest floors of the dungeon would be enough to end him, Blaeu accepted. And as he continued to defeat monster after monster, he eventually became known as the best tank in the Labyrinth Knights—no, the best in all Puriff. The entire town revered him.

"Guess I'll join the fray," said a voice from beside me. The sound of crackling followed.

It was finally time! The Labyrinth Knights' biggest gun, the Thunderspear himself, was about to make an appearance.

The spear in Reisch's right hand sparked with green lightning, which showered him and the ground below while letting out a tremendous roar. This was Reisch's legendary weapon, Emberain—the source of his nickname, “Thunderspear.” In terms of skills, Reisch was every bit Force's equal. But if you factored in their equipment, the stronger of the two was easily Reisch Mistray, the frontrunner of the Labyrinth Knights since its foundation.

“Here goes!” he cried.

His right arm was pulled back, his stance shifted low. He leaned away from the monster...then with a snapping twist of his body, hurled his spear in a blindingly fast underthrow. Emberain tore through the air like an arrow.

By the time the cervine monster noticed the attack, it was too late. The lightning from its antlers was overpowered—negated—by the thunderbolt from the spear. It flew true, piercing straight through the deer's head. There was nothing but a hole left where its muzzle used to be.

“Return, Emberain.”

Reisch raised his right hand in front of him. With another peal of thunder, the spear reappeared in his grasp. This was the legendary Emberain, a mysterious magic weapon that returned to its owner when its name was called. I'd never seen it in person before, but I could tell with one glance that it was an incredibly powerful artifact. I had to wonder just how it worked.

But as I beheld Reisch's incredible performance, another spectacle was taking place in my periphery.

“O Dark Lord, come forth and subjugate! Shadow Ball!”

The mage with chains wrapped around his arms muttered an incantation that summoned several black spheres, each about a meter in diameter. They floated forward unsteadily until they bumped into a giant bear monster that leaped out of the forest.

“Wha...?”

I was braced for an explosion, but nothing happened. The black sphere stopped atop the bear, threatening to consume it. Yet more spheres did the same, attaching themselves to other monsters that appeared from the forest.

“My spells wreak not destruction, Sage Snatcher. True power is the power to restrain others. Observe.”

I looked back to see the bear monster now struggling as though it couldn't move. The other monsters in contact with black spheres were behaving the same way.

“Return, Emberain!”

With captive targets, Reisch was practically shooting fish in a barrel. One by one, the woodland monsters fell prey to Emberain.

“A binding spell?” I remarked. “Nice.”

Mister “Shadow's End” wore a flashy black robe with a red crest embroidered here and there, and that's not to mention his eyepatch or the chains on his arms. His outfit was ostentatious and his incantation questionable, but in spite of appearances, he was the real deal. He was quick with a powerful spell, setting up swamps of darkness where the monsters appeared to slow them down and then hitting them with a debuffing fog to limit their actions.

“What a surprise, right?” the priestess responded as she cast supporting spells. “He's actually a lot more competent than he looks.”

She was focusing her magic on Blaeu, who was on the front line alone, while occasionally healing Reisch from the recoil of using Emberain. It was a pretty dexterous display. Nothing flashy, just dependable support. It was like watching a textbook healer at work, and there was nothing more comforting to the rest of a party. Clearly, her popularity wasn't the only thing that made her a top-tier priestess.

“Silence, woman! Flaunting one's strength is the brash behavior of boors. True leaders conduct themselves with dignity, never letting on to their full power.”

“Huh? But you're fighting like you always do.”

“Indeed, for I conceal my true strength on a regular basis—”

“Meaning you normally slack off in the dungeon, huh? I'm going to tell Reisch!”

“Hey! Knock it off! Don’t do that! He’ll get mad at me! I’m giving it my all—I always do! There’s no way I’d slack off in a dungeon with our lives at stake!”

“I wonder about that... You’re actually hiding your true strength from us, aren’t you? I can feel it,” the priestess said with a laugh. The black mage was trying to act cool, but she’d put him in his place.

“Speaking of, about Courie...” I said, looking over at the young mage continuously firing off spells. “Is it just me, or does his Magic Missile travel off course a lot?”

His Magic Missiles were darting all around the battlefield without any apparent rhyme or reason. Shooting an indirect path wasn’t inherently a bad thing, but this was extreme. Each magical bolt flew in an erratic pattern. As far as I could tell, they were each connecting with their targets in the end. They just took all manner of unnecessary detours and loops to get there. It was like watching a performance—an entertaining fight rather than an efficient one. The precision Courie had used to lure the monsters to us was nowhere to be seen.

“Quite astute of you to notice, Sage Snatcher,” the black mage said in a forcefully low voice. “So you see the trajectory of his Magic Missile as trifling child’s play, do you? You believe him to be a third-rate sorcerer who regards battle with sloth and contempt?”

“I didn’t say that...”

Though he does kinda look like he’s playing around...

Courie was only racking up minimal damage with his Magic Missiles. He was no match for the Emberain-wielding Reisch or the power tank Blaeu, and such a low-impact spell made him even less effective than the party’s supporting black mage. At the end of the day, no matter how talented he was with Magic Missile, Courie was burdened with Mapping.

Skills were essential to adventurers—especially to support members of dungeoneering teams. And Mapping took up all three slots with an ability utterly unworthy of its cost. Anyone who possessed it would be forever hamstrung in combat. Regardless of the knack Courie had for magic, he’d never stand up against a mage with relevant skills. That was essentially the same wall I’d run into myself. It was simply the fate of Mapping holders.

Yet the black mage admonished me with a chuckle as he nimbly cast his next spell, “Even if you did not say it out loud, the thought still tickled your brain, did it not? Listen well and let this be a warning: you’re underestimating Courie.”

“I’m underestimating him?”

“Indeed. The Labyrinth Knights have grown stronger and more stable since he joined our fold—and that’s with one less attacker among us. Courie is a mage truly worthy of his vanguard position.”

They were stronger with fewer attackers? Was that even possible? The main cannons of the Labyrinth Knight’s A-team were all top-tier adventurers. For a Mapping holder to outclass them... It was almost unthinkable.

“How?” I asked in disbelief.

“Simple. Those Magic Missiles may look like they’re zooming around randomly, but they’re actually spelling out messages for us,” the priestess replied with a twirl of her staff. “Courie uses their trajectories to assign orders. For example, see that blue Magic Missile that just turned at a right angle? That was for Blaeu. Call sign B-3: land one hit on your current target before switching to the enemy in our current direction of travel.”

“Huh...?”

To my shock and awe, Blaeu changed targets exactly like the priestess described.

“Next is that green Magic Missile, a single shot moving in a straight line. This one’s for Reisch,” she continued. “Call sign G-1: launch a full-on attack until the enemy is defeated.”

A clap of thunder followed, and a hole opened in the target wyvern’s chest. Reisch then called Emberain back as he sought out his next foe.

“See? Courie’s like the command tower of our party. He’s a genius gamemaster single-handedly managing this complex battle. Ever since he joined up, Blaeu gets hurt less. And as the one who has to heal him, that makes me happy. Watch. This is how Courie distracts monsters.”

On cue, a Magic Missile struck a great wolf in the side of the face. It turned in

the direction of the impact only to be met with a blow from Blaeu. The two of them naturally began tangling again afterward.

“He also puts up barriers to protect our attackers.”

With a whirl of his wand, Courie pointed at Reisch with the wand in his left hand. A barrier appeared at an angle to block an incoming breath attack, giving Reisch an opening to retaliate.

Wait, since when did he have a wand in his left hand? That makes two in his right and one in his left. And he’s twirling them all so skillfully... Just what’s going on here?

“Doublecasting? No, he’s using Detection too, so he’s *triplecasting*?! Just who is this guy?”

Not even Erin could doublecast. The top mages in the nation could only doublecast at best, and here Courie was triplecasting—all while observing the battlefield and giving orders. Honestly, it was astounding. This was downright superhuman.

“Why, he’s the magic world’s most prodigious prodigy. He could have stood atop it all as the strongest of the Seven Sages to ever grace this earth...had only the fates blessed him with a worthy magic skill. Even I am but a babe before his mighty intuition for magic,” the black mage answered me.

“You accepted your defeat rather easily,” I scoffed.

“But of course. Any mage would give themselves over to envious despair in the face of such talent. I only regret destiny’s cruel joke in foisting Mapping upon him.”

The boy in question was drawing his own world of Magic Missile lines with a carefree smile. I had to wonder what the rest of the world looked like through those clear, sparkling eyes of his.

“He’s got me beat...” I muttered.

I couldn’t deny that suddenly having an adoring fan fawn over me had gone to my head. After learning Shadow Runner and figuring out how to carry myself in the dungeon with Spell Shot, I’d gotten cocky. Arrogant. I felt like I’d earned my

place in the Arrivers. That I was the strongest Mapping user in the world.

But I was wrong. Meeting Courie had been a rude awakening. I was one of the have-nots, and I'd only just now remembered that undeniable fact.

"Come on, Master Note! Why don't you join in? You've gotten the hang of how this works now, right? So let's fight together!"

His brutally innocent invitation struck me with fear for a brief moment. What if I didn't meet his expectations? What if he saw my petty fighting style and lost all admiration for me?

Courie was a threat. No, the Labyrinth Knights as a whole were. They had the potential to conquer the dungeon for real. They were capable of snatching that honor right out from under the Arrivers' noses.

Before now, all I'd done was chase after my predecessors. It was following in Jin's footsteps that led me to success in the Arrivers. But things were changing. There was a younger generation of rivals sneaking up on me. My battle was far from over, and this was no time to rest on my laurels.

"There's no way I've gotten the hang of this, man. It'll take everything I've got just to keep up."

I was a challenger. That would be my attitude from now on. I couldn't afford to cower at the thought of being a disappointment anymore.

Here I had an opportunity to learn from a top-tier party and their prodigy mage. I was determined to seize it for all it was worth. So with silent thanks to Courie for proposing that I tag along with the vanguard, I stepped out onto the battlefield.

The Young Prodigy and the Phantom Sage

After fighting the monsters Courie lured to us on floor 18, the Labyrinth Knights and I decided to explore a bit more before calling it a day. Courie whined in protest, of course, but I wasn't supposed to be with the vanguard in the first place. I'd only gone with them because Courie insisted on it. The team really had nothing to gain from me being there, thus we decided to call the excursion early.

We'd just left the ruins that housed the warp crystal to the other floors, and Courie was happily rambling with no sign of the whining tantrum he threw earlier: "Man, I'm so glad that I got to fight alongside you, Master Note. That was so inspiring! I can't believe you can do so much with just Mapping. Do you think I could be doing more too?"

"I don't really feel like I was able to show you anything that useful, though," I replied. "You were way more impressive. I had no idea you were such a talented mage."

"Well, I am a genius after all—or so everyone tells me, anyway," he said casually. "Personally, I can't understand why everyone else just can't do the same."

This boy, who was used to being called a genius, sure had some bold views. The world must've looked different through his eyes. If he'd said all that to me before we'd set foot in the dungeon, I would've laughed him off in disbelief. But now that I'd seen what he could do firsthand, I wasn't laughing.

I could see Reisch and the other party members getting farther and farther ahead of us. I picked up the pace to catch up with them, and just as I did, the warp crystal began glowing. Another group had returned from the dungeon...

"Stop walking so close to me! Your shield keeps bumping into my shoulder, and it hurts!"

"You don't have any room to talk after misfiring that spell in my face. Now my

hair's all singed! How exactly do you plan on repaying me for that?"

"You can fix it with a healing spell."

"And you can fix your shoulder with a healing spell."

"That's true... But it doesn't mean you have to keep bumping into me on purpose!"

"Those girls are pretty noisy," Courie remarked, folding his arms behind his head.

"Yeah..." I sighed.

There were only two girls I knew who would bicker so loudly in public, but I pretended not to know them as I kept walking. I had an image as a dignified adventurer to maintain here. Those girls were absolute strangers to me. Never met 'em before, even if their voices *did* sound familiar.

As I tried to hurry away, one called out, "Hey, look, it's Note."

There goes my cover...

I turned around in resignation only to have my worst fears confirmed. One of the girls was waving... while the other had yet to notice me.

"Don't try to change the subject on me, Roslia. I'm not going to fall for that anymore."

"I'm telling the truth, Erin! Just look!"

"As if I would believe you. I'm not that stupid."

"Okay, then let's make a bet. If I'm telling the truth, what'll you do?"

"If you're telling the truth, then I'll strip and—"

Just then, our eyes met. Erin froze on the spot.

"You'll strip and do what?" Roslia prodded.

"Ummm... Take a bath, of course. Like I always do."

"Right, right. Okay, so you're gonna go streaking through Puriff."

"I hadn't gotten that far yet!"

Wait, “yet”? So you actually were gonna go that far?

Mouth agape, I continued to observe their back-and-forth until Erin turned a sharp glare my way.

“Why are you even here, Note?” she demanded. “I almost became a streaker because of you!”

“That’s ludicrous!” I yelled. How in the world was this on me? It was clearly her fault.

“Say... Do you know these oddballs, Master Note?” Courie asked.

“As much as it pains me to admit, I’m afraid I can’t deny the truth...”

Personally, I would’ve classified Courie as an oddball too, but that just seemed like the pot calling the kettle black right now... I really had to wish Roslia and Erin would save their bickering for behind closed doors.

“So who’s this?” Roslia asked, tapping a finger against her cheek.

The boy in front of me grinned cheerfully and answered, “I’m Courie Louison, Master Note’s disciple! I’m also a Labyrinth Knight. It’s nice to meet you.”

Since when did I have a disciple? And don’t tack the Labyrinth Knight part on there like it’s an afterthought!

“It’s nice to meet you too, Courie. I’m Roslia, Note’s girlfriend.”

“You sure are beautiful, Miss Roslia. You’re perfect for Master.”

“Really? You’ve got a good eye, kid!”

“Okay, enough with the tall tales,” I interjected.

Roslia always introduced herself to people that way, and I was starting to get a little desensitized to it. My reaction was way too slow this time. What if I up and forgot to deny it one day?

“Roslia and I aren’t dating,” I clarified. “We’re fellow party members. She just has bad taste in jokes and likes to make other people uncomfortable.”

“What?! You’re so awful, Note! You’re making me sound like some wicked vixen!”

“Well...”

Look no further than the past. How can you play innocent after everything you've done? Did you come down with a case of amnesia?

“Courie Louison? Where have I heard that name before...?” Meanwhile, Erin was muttering to herself without joining the conversation. When her carmine eyes fell on the wand he was spinning in his hand, they suddenly went wide. “Wait, are you that child prodigy?”

“Do you two know each other?” I asked.

“Not personally, but he’s famous,” Erin replied. “I remember hearing rumors about him back in school. Everyone talked about the child prodigy of District 1.”

“It’s nice to meet you too—and an honor to be acknowledged by an upperclassman! I’m Courie, now known as the fallen prodigy,” he introduced himself, throwing up a peace sign. Despite the brutality of what he’d just admitted, his expression was as bright as ever.

“‘Fallen prodigy’? Did something happen?” Erin asked curiously.

“I wasn’t blessed with any magic-related skills, you see. It really is tough getting by without them. They make such a huge difference.”

“I’m sorry to hear that...”

“So I’m envious of you, Erin. You’ve got pretty good magic skills, right?”

“Well, yes. In my case, I’m nothing more than my skills, really,” Erin said. She tapped her crossed arms with an index finger. “But you made it into the Labyrinth Knights, so you must be good enough to get work. I don’t know which team you’re on, but even if you never live up to your former glory, it seems like things’ll work out for you.”

“Erin...” I piped up.

“What?”

“Courie’s part of their A-team.”

“Huh, really?!” Erin’s jaw hit the floor. “I mean, he’s clearly still a mage... Are you seriously telling me they have a mage with no magic skills in their

vanguard?!”

“Not exactly,” Courie began. “My magic is only supplementary to my real role in the party. I’m mainly a navigator.”

“You’re a dungeon navigator?”

“That’s right. I have the same Mapping skill as Master Note.”

Erin stared at Courie’s smiling face, then pensively looked upward for a moment before saying, “What a shame... Well, how’d things go, Note? You guys went dungeon diving together, right?”

“To be honest, he’s stronger than me.”

“I don’t doubt it—and that’s what scares me,” she muttered.

“So you take me at my word, just like that?”

“If he’s as talented as the rumors suggested, then yes. His reputation preceded him in Izaar.”

“I see...”

“For better *and* worse.”

“Wait, what’s the ‘worse’ part?”

“That he slept around with lots of girls.”

“Ah, so he was famous for that too.”

“He even dated one of the girls in my class at school.”

“Huh?! Who was it?” Courie jumped in. “You went to the District 4 academy, right? The only older girls I dated from there were Mifa, Erle, May, Grisha, and Felt... Was it one of them?”

“We narrowed it down to that specific of a category and there are still five candidates?” I remarked in awe. No category required—I didn’t have even one past girlfriend to name. Not. One. Single. Girl.

“I knew about Mifa, but you dated Felt too?!” Erin exclaimed.

“Well, yeah...” Courie chuckled, bashfully scratching at his cheek.

Jeez. This guy’s innocent looks sure belied his true nature...

“What’re you giving me that cold stare for?! I remembered all their names, didn’t I?! You could at least praise me for that!”

“I question your standards for ‘praiseworthy.’”

That he remembered the name of every girl he’d had a relationship with could be considered impressive, but the fact that there were so many of them in the first place? Not so much. We lived in totally different worlds. I couldn’t judge him by my standards...

“Talking to someone from back home is really nostalgic though. What fun,” said Courie.

“Hey, don’t go hitting on Erin too,” I interrupted, suddenly worried.

Courie was a looker, after all. Even Erin would feel something if a cute boy like him put the moves on her.

“Don’t worry, Master Note. I wouldn’t hit on the girl you’ve got your eye on. I’m a changed man now,” Courie said with pursed lips. “I was a bit of a womanizer in the past, but the ladies stopped coming after me once I got Mapping. It made me realize they weren’t really interested in me, but rather my future. After that, it all felt so ridiculous that I stopped bothering with women altogether. I mean, I’ll still sleep with a girl who approaches me first, but nothing more than that. My heart’s just not in it right now...”

Courie smiled like always, but I couldn’t help noticing the way the light seemed to leave his eyes for a moment. Our situations were too different for me to fully appreciate what he’d been through, but here was another guy whose life had been ruined when he obtained the Mapping skill. It had abruptly cut off his potential, not unlike what happened to me when my childhood dream was crushed. And that was why he idolized me now—for opening a new door for Mapping users.

“You’ve got your eye on Erin, Note?” Roslia chimed in, her fists clenched unhappily. “You shouldn’t bother with a woman like her, you know?”

“So you really do like me after all, Note...” Erin murmured, blushing timidly.

I swear, these two live in their own worlds...

My original plan was to drop by the Labyrinth Knights' headquarters following our excursion, but after running into Erin and Roslia, I decided to head home with them instead. As we walked along, I was sandwiched between Roslia on my right and Erin on my left. Any passerby probably thought I was a lucky bastard with a lady for each arm.

"Gosh, it's been so long since we were alone together like this," Roslia said, grabbing hold of me.

Huh? Did I hear her right? Erin's right here...

"Hold on, Roslia. Erin's—"

"Hmm? Is something the matter, Note?"

"Don't give me that. Erin's right h—"

"The last we had time to just the two of us was back in the capital, wasn't it?"

"Ah, so you're just carrying on like she's not here..."

I wasn't sure how to react to Roslia cutting me off like that.

"Umm... I'm here too, you know..." Erin finally piped up, hesitantly raising her hand. See? The situation was so weird that she didn't know how to respond to it either. "Speaking of, though, were you two living together while I was in Izaar?"

"That's right— Gah, I responded to her!" squeaked Roslia.

"Good! As you should! Being ignored hurts, you know? It reminds me of being bullied back at school," Erin said, snapping back to normal. I didn't realize that was why she'd been so quiet.

"Yeah, I'm sorry," Roslia clucked. "But could you refrain from inserting your angsty backstory so smoothly into the conversation? You're making me feel bad."

"If you don't want to feel bad about it, then stop being a jerk. Who knew you had a conscience? What a shocker."

"Who's being the jerk right now? Even I have feelings, you know?"

I had to admit, I was totally with Erin on this one. The Crusher herself didn't

have any business lecturing people about feelings.

“So, what gives?” she asked. “Why are you asking about the past?”

“Because I’m curious! You two were together the whole time I was gone, right? What... What happened?”

“Ha ha! I get it. You’re nervous. You wanna know if anything happened between us while you were outta the picture, eh?” Roslia smirked at the way Erin fidgeted.

Yeah, this wasn’t a lady-on-each-arm situation at all. I was literally just stuck in the middle of their bickering. This was a battlefield. I was fully aware that nothing good would come from it, but I also feared what lies Roslia would feed Erin if I left now.

I haven’t done anything to be ashamed of. I have to hold my ground here.



“That’s exactly right! So what happened? Out with it, Roslia!” Erin begged.

“Fine. If you insist.” Roslia cleared her throat. “You see...”

“Uh-oh...” Erin gulped.

“The truth is...”

“The truth is?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“Nothing happened at all! Isn’t that just awful? Ugh!”

“What was all that dramatic build up for, then?!” Erin demanded in clear shock, coming over to grab Roslia by the collar. “Hearing you say nothing just makes it more suspicious! You’d better not be hiding anything!”

“Listen, if I had any dirt, I’d be bragging about it.”

“I don’t trust you... What’s your side of the story, Note?”

“I mean... Roslia said it all...” I muttered in a stupor at this turn of events. I’d never thought she’d tell the truth. I apologized to her internally for doubting her.

“I’m surprised,” said Erin, relenting. “What gives, Roslia?”

“Things were complicated back then. Note wasn’t back to his normal self yet, so the mood wasn’t right for fooling around.”

“I suppose that’s fair...” Erin trailed off, most likely recalling the events following Jin’s death. She cast her eyes downward as she pursed her lips into a thin line.

“And that pain in the butt Miya kept getting in the way...” Roslia murmured.

“Huh?! Wait a minute! Who is Miya?!”

“Ooh, so you don’t know, do you? She’s an old friend of Note’s.”

“What?! You’ve never said a word about her to me, Note! What’s the meaning of this?!”

The relatively somber atmosphere of the conversation was blown away in an instant by that one bombshell from Roslia.

“Huh? Have I really never told you about Miya before, Erin?”

“I don’t know any Miyas!”

“I mean, she was my childhood friend—I’m sure I told you about this. We adventured together before I joined the Arrivers, but we had a falling out.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard that story... Wait, you met your childhood friend again?!”

“Yup. While Roslia and I were in the capital.”

“And you didn’t think to mention that until now?!”

“It, uh, kinda slipped my mind...”

First we went to get Erin, then there was the uproar about what I did at the Seventh Sage Selection, all the fallout from that, our reunion with Force, and most recently the search for a new member... I’d been really busy, okay?! It wasn’t like I was keeping secrets from her on purpose!

“Did you two...do anything?” she asked.

“Nope. Nothing at all.”

“Really? Didn’t you used to have a crush on her?”

“Don’t lie, Note! The three of us went adventuring together! Saying that’s ‘nothing’ is rude to Miya!”

“Hey! So something *did* happen between you!”

Damn it, Roslia... You said that to piss Erin off on purpose, didn’t you? You’ve never cared about Miya before! You teased the hell out of her! Why are you acting like her friend now?!

“That was it, right...?” Erin said quietly. “Tell me that’s all you did...”

“We came back to Puriff together too!” Roslia added. “Shared a carriage and everything.”

“So she’s in town?! You didn’t say anything about that either, Note!”

I mean, sure, we’d shared a carriage, but it wasn’t because we’d wanted to.

Things were still awkward between us, and Roslia did nothing but pick on Miya the entire time.

“Is she still in town?” Erin asked.

“Yup! And she’s going to start dungeon diving thanks to Note,” threw in Roslia yet again.

“Why didn’t you tell me about any of this?! You’re definitely hiding something, aren’t you?! Spit it out!” Erin demanded, squeezing her eyes shut.

It wasn’t like I thought it’d be a disaster if they met. It really wasn’t anything like that. Really.

“In fact, let’s go and see her,” she insisted. “Right now.”

“Please spare me, Erin...”

“Why? D-Don’t tell me you’re secretly dating...!”

“No, we’re not. The opposite, actually. We’re still on pretty bad terms, and we promised not to see each other.”

“It’s fine. I get it. You’re just hiding it because you’re trying not to hurt my feelings, right? I understand. It’s okay. I’m happy for you... You’re finally dating your first love...”

“You don’t understand anything! Listen to the words coming out of my mouth!”

Her face certainly didn’t look like she was happy for me. The light was gone from her eyes. It was like her very soul was leaving her body.

“We are n-o-t dating! There’s nothing between me and Miya!”

“R-Really...?”

“Really. We’ve settled into a rivalry, and now we’re competing to see who can conquer the dungeon first. That’s our relationship now, though it’s kind of hard to explain...”

“So you didn’t make up? That doesn’t sound good either, Note.”

“You’re telling me.”

How *did* Miya and I end up in this twisted relationship instead of just making up like normal people? I know it was complicated at the time and all, but looking back on it, surely we could've done better than this...

"At any rate, that's how it is. I haven't seen Miya since we got back to Puriff. I wonder what she's up to, actually. Maybe she's found a nice party to join."

There were several ways to get into dungeon diving, but the fastest was simply to join an established party. The top gigs in town were the Labyrinth Knights, Liberation, and the Arrivers. Valkyrie used to be a front-runner as well, but they'd lost a lot of momentum when their knife-throwing thief Riece retired.

"It doesn't seem like she joined up with the Labyrinth Knights, so maybe she went to Liberation or Valkyrie. Or maybe someone else," I wondered aloud.

"I haven't heard about it from any of the other parties though," replied Roslia with a shrug.

"That's true. She'll be big news when she joins a party."

"Speaking of adventurer gossip, did you hear?" Roslia continued, "The government's going to be getting into the dungeon-diving business too."

"Wait, what?! Get out." If there was going to be a national effort to conquer the dungeon, the adventuring industry in Puriff was on the verge of major change—and I'd been none the wiser. "Did you know about this, Erin?"

"Yeah. I overheard when Roslia and I were at the guild."

Ah, so that's where they got their information. Maybe I should go there more often myself... Information is a powerful weapon, after all, and having an ear to the ground might make it easier to find a new member.

"Still, I have to wonder how it's all going to turn out. Do you think we'll butt heads?" she asked.

"Who knows?" I asked in turn. "If people across the country start gathering in Puriff, finding new blood might be easier. But it also means other people will be headhunting potential recruits as well."

"And I can't say I'm happy about getting more rivals..."

“There’ll be both pros and cons, for sure.”

There wasn’t anything in particular we could do about that, but it would be important to keep all this information in mind moving forward. If the government suddenly snatched up a surplus of adventurers, we’d have to move fast to get ours first—although that was just one possibility out of many.

“But why now?” I had to ask. “The government hasn’t been interested in the dungeon for a while, right?”

“You’re part of the reason, Note. It was learning how useful Mapping was in the dungeon that made them decide to take the plunge.”

I was sure Courie had more to do with that than I did. My accomplishments with Mapping had only been shared with select parties in town, but Courie was well known even before he came to Puriff. And ever since he’d joined up with the Labyrinth Knights, everyone wanted to know what was so special about him.

So now, two top-tier dungeon parties had navigators with the same non-combat skill. That clearly wasn’t a coincidence. It was probably what had tipped the rest of society off about Mapping’s usefulness in the dungeon.

“Say, you said the government’s getting into the dungeon-diving business, but do you know who’s spearheading the operation? It’s not a general or someone like that, is it?”

“Nah.”

“Yeah, of course not. No bigwig would try something that crazy, right?”

“No, I meant it was someone higher up than that.”

I cocked my head at Roslia’s words. Higher up than a general would have to be...

“Royalty?!” I exclaimed.

“Bingo!”

“For real...?”

I was shocked, but Roslia’s next words added a whole new layer of

astonishment on top of it all...

“And not just any royal either. We’re talking the Tyrant Princess, Leyfa Southerndall herself!”

The Tyrant Princess

Leyfa Southerndall was the third princess of this country, and third in line for the throne. And it was one week after I'd initially heard her name from Roslia's lips that I first received contact.

The front doorbell rang at HQ. I spied an unfamiliar woman through the peephole, so I decided to open up and see what she wanted. She had black, bobbed hair, an open jacket, and a rapier on her waist in plain sight.

"Can I help you?" I asked.

Black, monolid eyes stared back at me. "Are you Note Athlon?" she asked plainly.

"I am..."

I wasn't expecting her to ask for me specifically. Wary of this visit from such a stranger, I watched her carefully.

"Note Athlon, Her Highness Princess Leyfa has summoned you. Prepare to leave immediately."

"Excuse me?"

Wait a minute. First of all, who are you? And who's Princess Leyfa? You mean the Leyfa Southerndall?

I couldn't follow this situation at all. Yet she continued in spite of my confusion, "Princess Leyfa is willing to meet an ordinary adventurer like you. Do not keep her waiting."

"Uh, you mean right now? I have other plans..." I was supposed to go on a dungeon run with the Labyrinth Knights' B-team today, and this was awfully sudden to cancel on them.

"Plans that are more important than a summons from Her Highness?" the girl asked, her brow furrowed. She wasn't all that tall, so she was looking up at me.

"It's just a prior engagement. That's all."

“You mean to say that you’re turning down the princess?”

“That’s not what I mean, but...”

“Then hurry up. Do not waste Her Highness’s valuable time.”



Was this girl even listening to me? I said I had plans, but she just brushed it right off. And she was still staring at me awfully intently.

“If you resist any further, I will arrest you under Her Highness’s authority. Princess Leyfa has ordered me to bring you in no matter what.”

“Seriously...?”

Reluctance was akin to resistance, it seemed. How tyrannical. But it seemed I had no choice in the matter. I felt bad for the Labyrinth Knights, but I was going to have to take a rain check on our excursion.

“I understand. Will you allow me some time to cancel my plans?”

“Did you not hear me? I said not to waste Her Highness’s time.”

“I just need thirty minutes...”

“I’m warning you once again. Do not keep Her Highness waiting.”

“F-Fine! Will you just let me tell one of my housemates to pass along the message?”

“Final warning. I will not allow you to keep Her Highness waiting a second longer.”

“Okay, okay! I’m coming!”

She really wasn’t listening to me, huh? What a vexing visitor. Still, I didn’t want to be arrested for treason, so I decided to follow along. But it was scary, okay? I’d never had a royal messenger come to fetch me before. What was I supposed to say? I had no idea how to handle this.

“Um, can I at least know *why* I’m being summoned?”

“You will follow me quietly. Understood?”

“Yes, ma’am...”

It seemed I wasn’t allowed to ask questions either. Wasn’t this a little *too* draconian?

The stony-faced girl took me to a famous hotel in town, which was apparently where the princess was staying and where I was going to be meeting her.

“I shouldn’t need to tell you what will happen if you show Her Highness any disrespect,” she warned me with a glare.

Of course. Even I had that much good sense. I wasn’t thrilled with the way I’d been summoned to this abrupt meeting, but I wasn’t stupid enough to forget my manners on the way.

“Yeah, yeah. I just gotta be on my best behavior, right?”

“Watch your tone. As Princess Leyfa’s attendant, any disrespect you show me reflects on Her Highness.”

“What? So I have to be on my best behavior with you too?”

Okay, so apparently my good sense wasn’t quite as good as I’d thought. I’d already managed to get off on the wrong foot somehow. This girl was just that much of a stickler, I guess. Yeah, that had to be it.

“Move along already,” she said, urging me inside the hotel.

I had to wonder what business the third princess had with me in the first place. I couldn’t think of any reason she’d want to summon me. I’d never met royalty before, and I certainly didn’t have any personal connections to any. Maybe she had business with the Arrivers... No, then she wouldn’t have summoned me specifically. Force was our leader, so he naturally should’ve been the first choice as party rep.

“It’s Sofie. I have brought Note Athlon,” the hooded girl said, knocking on the door.

There was a pause before a reply came from the other side: “You may enter.”

So the girl’s name was Sofie, huh? Sofie opened the door carefully, revealing a spacious room with a crimson red carpet and a luxurious chandelier hanging from the ceiling. On the far side sat a lone woman upon a throne-like chair. Her wavy, blonde hair was long enough to dangle over the armrests. She had her arms and legs crossed, and her commanding gaze fell directly on me.

“Hmm. So you’re Note Athlon.” Blue eyes observed me from head to toe. The way the corner of her mouth quirked up unnaturally was unsettling. “You were the first to use Mapping inside the dungeon, and you’re the thief who led the

Arrivers to the honor of being the first party to reach floor 20, no?”

“Well, sorta...”

“What’s with that vague answer? Don’t forget you stand before Her Highness,” Sofie reminded me, her glare sharper than ever.

But nevertheless, I couldn’t take the credit for the Arrivers reaching floor 20. We’d only gotten that far because everyone else was so strong. Using Mapping to explore the dungeon hadn’t even been my idea.

“Stand down, Sofie. I can forgive that much,” the princess ordered.

“Yes, Your Highness,” Sofie replied, taking a step backward with a bow of her head.

“Now, Note Athlon,” Leyfa continued, crossing her legs the other way, “leave the Arrivers and join the party I’m making.”

“Huh?” I doubted my ears. Surely I hadn’t heard her correctly just now.

“Quit the Arrivers and navigate for my party instead.”

“...Huh?” I gasped, my jaw nearly on the floor. It seemed I’d heard her just fine the first time after all.

“Did I say something strange?” Leyfa asked, puzzled by my surprise. “Were you unaware of my venture into dungeon conquest?”

“I’ve heard rumors, but...”

“Then the rest should be obvious. Dungeoneering parties require a Mapping navigator, and I’m appointing you for the role.”

“I’m sorry, but this is awfully sudden...”

And that was putting it nicely. I had my own plans. I’d just reunited the Arrivers, and walking away from that was a big, heavy-handed ask—even from the Tyrant Princess. I might’ve been swayed if she’d tried to recruit me half a year ago, but now that I had the party back in business, I’d have to be crazy to accept Leyfa’s proposal.

“I’m already an Arriver, so I’m afraid I can’t join Your Highness’s party,” I explained politely.

“You must have misunderstood. I’m not *asking* you to join, I’m *telling* you. It’s an order,” she replied with an index finger placed against her cheek. “It’s not a bad deal for you, though. If you join our ranks, you’ll get to see the end of the dungeon. I’ve already gathered the best possible party to clear it.”

There, Leyfa turned her gaze to a middle-aged man wearing a priest’s vestments. He glanced up briefly, then disinterestedly turned back to his book.

“I give you the former top inquisitor and the strongest war priest in the nation, Gilbert Einzach,” she said. “He’s a living legend who single-handedly took the enemy castle in the war against the heretics.”

If I recalled correctly, war priests were a specialized role. They used the same holy arts as regular priests, but they also trained in maces and other blunt weapons for combat. Being able to dish out the hurt *and* the heals was pretty impressive—most people who tried to attempt it would find themselves unable to do either. As such, it was a battle style reserved for expert combatants, and it seemed like this guy had mastered it. From what I could sense with Enemy Search, he was easily as strong as Force—maybe even stronger. Leyfa had said he was the strongest war priest in the country, and I believed it.

“Next, I give you a Seventh Sage with Superior Strike Mastery, Mille Gundak,” she continued.

“Wait, as in the Mille who won the Seventh Sage Selection just the other day?”

We’d seen her duel Eskar in the first Decafight match Ewell had taken us to see. She’d gotten her butt handed to her that day, but was ultimately declared the victor of the tournament when everyone else dropped out. Thanks to that, she now had a reputation as the weakest of the Seven Sages.

“That’s right. She had a pathetic showing in the selection tournament, though I assure you she’s the real deal. She wasn’t able to demonstrate the full spread of her abilities under the narrow rules of Decafighting, but her true strength is in her well-rounded style. She’s both a swordfighter and a sorcerer—and as someone who’s been in the dungeon yourself, I’m sure you can appreciate her worth.”

That much was true. Adventuring parties usually consisted of front-line

fighters and rear-line support. That meant the entire formation was liable to fall apart if threatened from the rear. Essentially, the rear line was the core of any party, but it was also its greatest weakness. Leyfa's party, however, had both Gilbert and Mille—rare, multitalented adventurers who could handle themselves when push came to shove. And they had the careers to prove it.

“You may have reformed your little team, but in the end, the Arrivers are just a party that failed to clear floor 21. The party I'm making will break through it and beyond with ease. I've gathered more than enough strength to conquer the entire dungeon. All we need now is you.” Leyfa looked at me and continued, “If you join, I'll vanquish the dungeon and you'll all receive the honor of being part of the first party to do it. Win-win, wouldn't you say?”

When I first heard that someone from the royal family was getting into dungeon conquest, I'd ultimately dismissed the news, presuming that the endeavor would be a failure. Dungeons were the greatest mystery of our world. The average adventurer didn't stand a chance against them. There was no way an outsider was just going to march their way in and clear one, but Leyfa... Leyfa was perfectly prepared. The members she'd selected alone were on par with the Arrivers or the Labyrinth Knights. She was serious about this. She honestly meant to clear the dungeon.

“Why the dungeon, Your Highness?” I had to ask. Of course, I had no intention of going along with her demands either way. I was simply curious about what had her so motivated.

“Why? That should be obvious. I, Leyfa Southerndall, use whatever means necessary to obtain the things I want.”

“So you want the glory of conquering the dungeon?”

“No, dungeon conquest is merely the means. My true ambition is even greater.”

“And that is...?”

“The throne. Isn't that obvious?” Leyfa stated clearly. “The uncharted depths of the dungeon... If I'm the first to conquer them, not even my father or sisters will be able to overlook such a feat.”

“That’s why you’re doing this?”

“Precisely,” Leyfa replied with no hesitation, despite the fact that what she was saying was utterly incomprehensible.

I could understand wanting to ascend the throne. Surely anyone born into royalty considered it at least once in their life. But the dungeon was a different beast altogether. People died there—on the regular. So treating it like a shortcut to the throne... Not even that level of reward was worth the risk.

“You’re willing to stake your own life for a chance to inherit the crown?”

“Naturally. If I cannot rule, then I’m already as good as dead,” she replied, steeled with confidence. She was seriously willing to give her life for this.

“Why...?”

“Simple. If you’re born to rule, you aim to rule. It’s foolish to live your life kneeling before others when it’s your birthright to stand above them all,” she said with an unnerving grin.

These were the Tyrant Princess’s true colors. She had no qualms about quashing those who stood in her way. Rumor had it that she’d even plotted her own older sister’s assassination. Fortunately that attempt was foiled, but it was said the king gave up on Leyfa after the incident. And now here she was, trying to recruit me of all people. I could only hope that I’d get away from this encounter unscathed after turning her down.

“May I ask why you’re so interested in me, Your Highness? The Labyrinth Knights have a Mapping navigator too, and he’s far better than me.”

For now, I casually tried moving toward getting her to give up. I wasn’t really trying to sell Courie out. I legitimately couldn’t think of a reason Leyfa would pick me over him, so I was a bit curious.

“Yes, that Courie boy. I know of him. He’s an excellent mage, but he has no place in my party, for my party has no weaknesses. Courie may have impressive talents, but they’re catered to the back line. He cannot hold his own in battle.”

“I can’t either. I need the support of those around me.” And that was the truth. My Spell Shot was only possible with Erin’s trap magic. There was no way

I could fight alone.

“Really? Says the man who stole Erin Fortlord away from the Seventh Sage Selection by his lonesome? Fleeing such a heavily guarded venue was no mean feat.”

Apparently Leyfa knew all about what happened at the Seventh Sage Selection incident as well. Maybe Mille had told her, or maybe she’d even been there to see it for herself.

“I also hold you in high regard apart from your abilities,” she continued.

“And why’s that?” I asked.

“Because you and I aren’t so different,” she said, stroking her bewitching lips as she spoke. “You do whatever it takes to achieve your goals. You’re even willing to trample the happiness of others.”

“You sure don’t mince words, do you?”

“I only speak the truth. Erin Fortlord was about to be appointed the newest of the Seven Sages, yet you stopped her with but a word. You stole away her future for your own purposes. Am I wrong?”

“...You’re completely right.”

I couldn’t deny it. To further my own dreams, I’d taken Erin’s away. She said she didn’t mind, but I knew things were more complicated than that. And it wasn’t just Erin either. I’d essentially broken up Neme’s new party, not to mention dragged Roslia back into all this. I was a terrible person, just like Leyfa said.

“You’re an anomaly like me. But normal people aren’t the ones who get things done. Only aberrations like you and I have what it takes to dominate the dungeon,” Leyfa explained with an air of self-assurance. “Now, I’ll repeat myself one more time—join my party, Note Athlon.”

“I cannot deny it, Princess Leyfa,” I replied, bowing my head. “I may very well be the kind of man who’s willing to use any tool at my disposal. I might even be cold. For the sake of my own dreams, I may yet be willing to bring misery upon those around me.”

“Then—”

“But my dream is clearing the dungeon with the Arrivers. It won’t do for me to conquer it alone, thus I must respectfully decline your offer,” I said bluntly.

I honestly couldn’t care less about the Tyrant Princess and her prestige. Like I said, I was the worst. Yet there were four people in this world willing to stick with a bastard like me. As if I’d ever turn my back on them. Not even I would sink that low.

“I see. So negotiations failed after all,” Leyfa laughed.

A chill ran down my spine at those words—she’d been expecting this. I was instantly backed into a corner.

“Sofie, commence plan B.”

“Yes, Your Highness!”

Before I knew it, Sofie was on top of me with her rapier drawn. I tried to escape using Withdraw, but my surprise delayed me from reacting fast enough.

“Six Thrusts!” she shouted and unleashed an elegant piercing attack.

I tried to evade by twisting my body, but ended up taking one thrust to the thigh in the process. I hit the floor as burning pain flared through my leg.

“If you value your life,” Sofie said with her rapier pointed at my head, “you’d do well to surrender.”

Well, damn. She shut me down with force alone...

We were locked away in a private hotel suite. I’d have to make one hell of a commotion for someone to come running. Moreover, I was dealing with a princess here. The law would definitely be on her side. In other words, this little spat was decided the moment I’d entered this room. I had to hand it to the scheming Tyrant Princess... She was on another level. I’d completely let my guard down.



“If you’re going to be like this, then—” I started.

“Let me warn you,” Sofie interrupted. “You won’t get to activate the trap magic in your gloves. My rapier will be through your head first.”

Ugh, so they even knew about my ace in the hole too? But how? Only a handful of people should’ve known about my secret weapon. Trap Detection was a thief-only art, and Sofie had just given herself away as a knight thanks to Six Thrusts. Hunters could use similar detection arts, but knights shouldn’t have access to anything like that.

“Fine. I surrender,” I conceded.

“I’d never take you at your word. Hand over those gloves,” Sofie shot back, seizing them and cementing my defeat.

The Loyal Knight

“So, when do I get to leave?”

“When you agree to join Her Highness’s party, of course.”

Presently, Sofie and I had relocated to the room next door. (Apparently the princess had rented out the whole floor.) She’d tightly bound my arms and legs, and was now keeping a vigilant watch over me.

“Guess I’m never getting out then.”

Thankfully, they didn’t seem to have any plans of hurting me for the time being. I’d nervously been wondering how I was going to handle being tortured, but it seemed that kind of coercion was off the table. They wanted me to join the princess’s party of my own free will...despite the whole me being tied up thing.

“If you don’t want to die in those ropes, you will obey Her Highness. Understood?”

Sofie was supervising me under Leyfa’s orders, and fully intended to do so until I caved. It was an impressive show of loyalty. I had to wonder why she was so dedicated to a princess like that.

“Don’t try to pull anything funny. I’ll run you through without hesitation if you attempt to escape,” she scolded me even though I was just shifting my weight.

The war priest had healed my leg after she stabbed me earlier, but the pain was still fresh in my mind. Even if I knew she wasn’t going to kill me, it was only human nature to be fearful.

“I was just readjusting. I won’t try to run.”

“I don’t believe you. I know you can use Trap Dismantling. It wouldn’t be that hard for you to get out of these restraints,” she insisted, pointing her rapier at me with a glint in her eye.

Sofie apparently had a skill called Supreme Appraisal, which was how she

knew exactly what skills and arts I had at my disposal. It was a real pain. My entire hand had essentially been revealed, *and* I was tied up. Meanwhile, Sofie was easily as competent as a top-tier dungeoneer. Even though she'd caught me off guard, she'd still overwhelmed me in an instant. I had no realistic hope of escape here. Who would've thought that I'd meet my match in a hotel room instead of the dungeon?

"I won't resist, I swear. I don't like pain," I assured her.

"Then yield to Her Highness."

"I told you I can't do that. I won't fold no matter what you say," I spat out while staring up at Sofie's blade. Threatening me was pointless—this was one thing I wouldn't back down on. My friends believed in me and had followed me this far. I would never abandon them. "Won't you even consider my counteroffer? The Arrivers currently have an open slot, so we can add Her Highness if she's strong enough."

"As I said before, we can't do that either." Light from the window reflected off Sofie's sword. "Princess Leyfa needs to conquer the dungeon herself—anything less is hardly royal. If she joins the Arrivers, people will say that a top-tier party carried her through. That's why Her Highness must form and lead her own party."

Neither of us were willing to back down on this. It was a tough situation. Leyfa had to clear the dungeon with a party she'd formed herself, and I wanted to clear the dungeon with the Arrivers no matter what. Our goals were mutually incompatible. There was no compromise here, yet both of us refused to yield.

"Hahh..." I sighed heavily.

In other words, this was a battle of attrition between Leyfa and me. I'd never hold out if I exhausted myself now. I needed to conserve my energy and strength for the right moment. So for a change of pace, I decided to chat with Sofie a little.

"Say, why are you so devoted to the princess? How much is she paying you? Or are you being threatened?"

"No. I swore loyalty to her of my own volition."

“She doesn’t strike me as the loyalty-inspiring type...”

“Are you mocking Her Highness?” Sofie asked, drawing a step closer with her rapier at the ready.

Jeez, what a stick in the mud. A little banter isn’t gonna kill anyone...

“I’m not! Please put down your sword.”

“Then stop flapping your gums. I don’t want to hear another word unless you’re agreeing to obey Her Highness.”

“Aww, don’t be like that. I just want to know why you decided to follow her. Your reasoning might help convince me to join the party too.”

“I suppose that makes sense...” There, Sofie pensively placed a hand to her chin. “Fine. I’ll explain.”

She then went and took a seat in a nearby chair, but the wary way she kept a hand on her rapier told me she was still keenly on guard.

“I hail from a noble house,” she began. “But my mother and father died, leaving me on my own. My father did some bad things when he was alive, so he was stripped of his status. People began to talk about me as well after it happened. And while everyone scorned me, Her Highness alone extended a helping hand.”

“So she’s got a surprisingly kind side, huh?”

“I don’t believe so. Princess Leyfa only ever acts in her own self-interest. As someone who’s close to her, I understand that better than anyone. Her Highness most likely saw some use in me and wanted me indebted to her. That’s all.”

Yeah, that explanation made a lot more sense. I hadn’t known Leyfa long, so I couldn’t say it with absolute certainty, but she sure struck me as devoid of virtue.

“Still, that was more than enough for me. So I mean to serve her, even if it means playing the part of a pawn. That is how I’ve chosen to repay my debt.” Sofie looked me in the eye and continued, “I shall follow Princess Leyfa no matter what society thinks of her. Even if her methods are ruthless, I will always

stand by her. That's what I've sworn." She adjusted the grip on her rapier. "I would do anything for Her Highness—even torture you. So you should give in and join us already. You'll end up in the party one way or the other, so don't you think the painless route would be the smartest?"

Her flat tone of voice spoke to her resolve. She really would follow any order given. I guess Leyfa's subordinates were just as abnormal as she was...

This sucked. I had no intention of caving to torture, but dead men can't go dungeon diving. If I made them mad enough to kill me, I'd never be able to face Force and the others. I just had to get Sofie to lower her guard some... That was my only option for the time being.

Three hours had now passed since I was tied up. I tried wiggling my limbs a little to get my blood flowing, but that only earned me a glare from Sofie.

"I told you not to move."

"I know, but it's uncomfortable. Can you loosen these ligatures a little?"

"If I did that, you'd run."

Even after all this time, Sofie refused to budge. I'd tried distracting her with conversation, but she was awfully tight-lipped. She was driven by her loyalty, meaning she'd be impossible to shake.

"Do I need to teach you a lesson for you to understand?" she growled, now irritated by our little stalemate. Since I wasn't doing as I was told, she was clearly thinking of moving on to more aggressive methods.

"But Her Highness told you to refrain from violence, right?" I wasn't looking for pain, so I was anxious to stop her.

"*If possible*. She never said I couldn't be a little rough. Make no mistake. My priority is getting you to agree to join the party."

"But if you just leave me tied up, I might fold. There's no need to get impatient and resort to violence."

"You've already said you refuse to join us, and leaving you like this won't change anything. So it wouldn't hurt to try another method."

Sofie seemed to be on her last nerve. Dragging this out any longer would be difficult. But just as I braced myself for the worst...the doorbell rang.

“You should get that.”

“I know. It might be the princess.”

Sofie thus kept one eye on me as she went for the door. Seemed she wasn't going to trust me even for a second.

“Your Highness?” she asked, opening the door to reveal an unexpected figure.

“Master Note, are you here— Oh, a girl? Oops, were you two in the middle of something?” came a carefree voice that was most out of place given the atmosphere.

I'd recognize it anywhere—it was unmistakably the Labyrinth Knights' prodigious mage, Courie Louison.

“Alone in a hotel room with a girl, huh? So you really do have it in you, Master! You're all tied up and everything. What is this, BDSM? You sure have some hardcore tastes! Not even I've dabbled in that yet.”

And he had gravely misread the room. This wasn't some sex thing. I was a literal prisoner.

“Note's into BDSM?! Really?!” came another voice I recognized—this one belonging to Roslia, our party paladin who proceeded to pop her head in the door with furrowed brows. “I can't believe it... No wonder you never responded to any of my advances!”

Come on, give me a little credit! This is not what I'm into!

I had so many questions. What were the two of them doing together? Moreover, how had they found me? But first things first... I had to clear up this misunderstanding.

“You've got it all wrong! This woman and Princess Leyfa kidnapped me!”

“Oh, so *that's* what it was,” Courie said with a cheerful smile. “I thought it was weird when you didn't show up on time, so I headed over to your place. But Roslia didn't know where you went either, so I tried using Detection and tracked you down here.”

Attaboy, Courie! As expected of the genius mage who beat me at my own game.

It must've been a piece of cake for him to find me. The fact that Sofie hadn't let me leave a message for the Labyrinth Knights came back to bite her in the end. If she'd given me time to take care of my business, Courie never would've come looking for me.

"I'm glad you're not actually into BDSM, Note. I mean, no judgment! If that's your cup of tea, I can study up. I'll be the best S *and* M you could ever want!" Roslia assured me.

What kind of declaration is that? Please drop the fetish talk and just rescue me already...

"You're nasty, Master," Courie had to add.

Great. Now Sofie was looking at me funny too.

"I'm glad you're all having fun, but could you get me out of here?" I begged.

"You got it! We just need to beat her, right?" Roslia cooed, summoning Fractus in a flash.

Seeing this, Sofie broke out in a cold sweat. "Guide of the Holy Sword?! What is someone with a unique skill like that doing here?! My intel didn't say anything about this! The Arrivers' paladin is supposed to be a former priestess without any particular achievements to her name... What kind of monster are you?!" She was apparently shocked by what Supreme Appraisal had just revealed to her.

Roslia took the opportunity to level her shining blade at the knight, saying, "I'll let this go if you let Note go. But it's a limited time offer, so run while you can."

"On Her Highness's orders, I will not retreat," Sofie refused. She had her own reasons for standing her ground.

"Be careful, Roslia," I warned. "She's a formidable opponent."

"I know. She was able to capture you, after all."

I was relieved to know Roslia was taking this seriously, and I took the chance

to undo my ropes and stand up.

“Now it’s three on one. Will you let us go without a fight?” I asked Sofie.

If possible, I didn’t want to fight her. Leyfa and Gilbert were just next door. If they heard a commotion, they’d come running. That would make it three on three—in which case *we’d* be the ones at a disadvantage, given two of us lacked any combat skills. Roslia would probably have her work cut out for her against Gilbert alone.

“Causing a scene here would just mean trouble for the princess, wouldn’t it?”

“It would, but...” Sofie hesitated. Her eyes flickered between me and Roslia.

“What should we do, Master? I can use Magic Missile to send a signal and summon the rest of my party. Do you want reinforcements just in case?” Courie offered.

Hearing this, Sofie at last realized she had no chance of victory. She reluctantly lowered her rapier and glared at us, muttering, “Fine... I’ll let you go just this once.”

Just this once, huh? I was hoping she’d stay away from me forever, honestly. I nearly said that out loud, in fact, but decided it was best not to provoke her with any more banter. I was trying to avoid a fight—not start one.

“I understand. It’s getting late, so I’m going home for today. Please, don’t try something like this again,” I said instead.

But Sofie replied, “I cannot guarantee that. Princess Leyfa intends to have you by any means necessary.” It seemed she had no intention of giving up.

I had no response for her other than silence.

“So what’d they want with you, Note?” Roslia asked.

After successfully talking Sofie down, the three of us retreated from the hotel. Of course, Courie and Roslia had never seen Leyfa, so they still had no idea what was going on. I figured an explanation was the least I owed them.

“Remember how you told me about Princess Leyfa getting into dungeon conquest, Roslia? Well, she’s the one who summoned me here today.”

“Wha? The Tyrant Princess did?”

“Yeah. When I got to the hotel, she demanded I join the party she’s forming. And when I refused, she had me tied up. She said she wouldn’t let me go until I left the Arrivers for her.”

“That’s pretty heavy-handed...”

“You’re telling me. I hope she learned her lesson today and gives up,” I said, fully believing the opposite would happen.

As Sofie had warned us on our way out, Leyfa wasn’t the type to relent. And as long as she persisted, her subordinates would too. We’d very likely end up crossing swords again in the future, so I’d need to come up with a plan...

But while I was thinking all that over, Courie made a surprising comment: “Princess Leyfa, huh? I’ve met her once before.”

“Wait, really?!” I exclaimed.

“Yeah. It was when she first came to town, I think? She summoned me too.”

“For what?” Roslia asked.

“She mostly asked me questions about Mapping. Like how it worked and how to get the most out of it. She didn’t seem that interested in me personally, though. I guess she already had her sights set on Master Note, even back then.”

So she’d done her research, huh? How thorough. Leyfa really wasn’t an opponent to underestimate.

“I gotta say, she’s got great taste if she’s only got eyes for you. Can’t blame her for that.”

“*That’s* what you’re concerned about...?”

Jeez, had he talked to Leyfa like that too? I was starting to worry about this carefree pupil of mine.

“More importantly, Note, what are we going to do? What if the princess attacks again?”

“Good question...”

“It’d be a hassle if you’re captured again, so how about I become your

bodyguard? I'll stay with you from morning to night—no, I'll even sleep with you! I'll always be by your side, so it's like killing two birds with one stone! Great idea, right?"

"I've memorized the princess and Sofie's presences, so I'll know if either one of them gets too close. As long as I can sense them coming, I should be able to outrun them, so I'll be all right by myself. But I appreciate the thought."

"What a shame... I thought it was a brilliant plan," Roslia murmured dejectedly.

I mean, it wasn't realistic for us to stick together around the clock anyway. I had to go dungeon diving with the Labyrinth Knights, and Roslia and Erin were still doing loot runs. There was no guarantee Leyfa would use the same tactics next time either, so it wasn't worth putting our party activities on hold.

"We should tell the others about the possibility of her attacking, though," I followed up.

"I agree. Erin's gonna be so steamed when she hears it that she might storm right out of the house."

"Please stop her if that happens, Roslia."

"Why do I have to? You're her owner, so *you* look after her."

"What exactly is Erin to your party again...?" Courie asked us warily.

Hey, don't get the wrong idea! We're just joking around. She's a full-fledged human member of the team. She just sometimes acts like a mad dog that can't be controlled...

"For now, we'll give everyone the sitrep. If something happens, we can deal with it then. Sound good, Note?"

"Yeah. I'll see if I can come up with a plan too, just in case."

Despite saying that out loud, I was hoping there would be no need. I prayed for a trouble-free future as we set off toward home.

A Play Behind the Curtain

I'd expected Leyfa to make a move immediately after what happened, but things were surprisingly quiet. A little too quiet, actually, but I wasn't about to go looking for trouble if she wasn't going to make it. So for now, the Arrivers had resumed the search for a new member while keeping an eye out. There hadn't been much headway on the headhunting front thus far. It seemed like we'd exhausted our recruiting options in Puriff, so I'd tasked Force with scouting elsewhere and he'd set out for the capital last week.

As a general rule of thumb, skilled adventurers tended to gather in the big cities. So if we couldn't find who we needed here in town, that basically left the capital and Izaar. As for why we'd sent Force, well, there wasn't really anyone else for the job. Erin and Roslia were still doing loot runs in the dungeon, and I was still helping out the Labyrinth Knights' B-team. Neme was free, of course, but Force himself had shot that idea down immediately since her shyness would be a major inhibitor. Poor girl.

Personally, I was pretty fond of the capital and would've loved to see my old friends there again, but I had other obligations on my plate. So in my stead, I'd asked Force to deliver a special letter with updates on my situation and everything else I wanted to say. All I could do now was hope it arrived safely. And so, while Force was hard at work abroad...

"It's been forever since we went out together."

I was out on a date with Erin. Today was her and Roslia's day off from dungeon runs, and I just so happened to have the day off from helping the Labyrinth Knights too. See, this had all started when Erin suddenly leaned in earlier and whispered to me, "Hey, do you want to go out with just the two of us?"

We should have been focused on the search for a new member, but Erin and I had gone a whole year without seeing each other. Even after reuniting, we'd been too busy rebuilding the Arrivers to have any time to talk. As such,

spending some time together didn't sound so bad. So, figuring it wouldn't hurt to relax for a day, I'd accepted her invitation.

"We barely ever did this before either. Going out for no reason, I mean."

Surprisingly enough, I'd only ever been out with Erin on party-related business—grocery shopping, supply runs, etcetera. We rarely, if ever at all, had dates to ourselves. Sometimes I'd hang out with Roslia and Neme off duty, so to speak, but it seemed neither Erin nor I were much for inviting other people out.

"How come you decided to ask me out today?" I asked.

"You said you were free for once, so..."

"I know, but you never do this even when I am free."

"Well..." Erin poked her index fingers together as she faltered. "You went out with Roslia a lot while you were in the capital, right? She told me all about it..."

"I mean, yeah. But it's not like anything happened."

"You also reunited with your childhood friend, right?"

"Nothing happened there either. I told you that already, didn't I?"

"You did, but... I just thought it sounded nice, okay!" Erin blurted out. "I haven't seen you in ages, I wanted a chance to hang out with you too!"

Is this what they call jealousy? If so, I'm really sorry, Erin...but I'm on cloud nine right now.

Back when the Arrivers fell apart, I'd tried to stop Erin from leaving for the magic city. I got swept up in my emotions and suggested that we quit adventuring, start dating, and eventually get married. She turned me down, saying she wanted to focus on studying magic. That's why I'd started fearing she no longer cared for me—but it now seemed I'd been overthinking it.

"I wanted to hang out with you too, Erin."

"Note..."

"So thanks for inviting me out today. Let's have plenty of fun together," I said, responding to her feelings honestly.

Just for today, I wanted to keep my head free of thoughts about dungeon

diving, new members, and everything else unnecessary. I intended to enjoy the day to the fullest.

“Yeah, let’s have lots of fun,” Erin replied. “So, where do you want to go?”

“I don’t really care. What about you?”

“Me neither... I don’t normally go out on my days off, so I don’t even know where *to* go.”

Erin seemed outgoing at a glance, but she literally didn’t get out much. She’d go dungeon diving and shopping, but I’d never really seen her go out for fun on her days off.

“By the way, what kind of places did you go to with Roslia?” she asked.

“You really wanna know?”

“Just for reference. I won’t be offended.”

“Mostly restaurants, really.”

“Restaurants, huh? That’s too bad...”

“Yeah, we just ate.”

“I’m still full.”

It was a little after noon, so Erin and I had eaten lunch before leaving the house. Unfortunate timing, really.

“I guess we went shopping too sometimes,” I volunteered.

“For what?” she asked.

“Nothing special. Just clothes and stuff.”

“Clothes, huh?” Erin mumbled, twirling her hair around her finger. “I don’t do much shopping for myself. I mostly just wear the same old outfits.”

“Isn’t that all the more reason to go? If you don’t have new clothes, we can buy some.”

“That’s a nice way to think of it. Okay, let’s go shopping.”

And so we finally had a plan for our date—we’d start off clothes shopping for Erin.

“Where do you want to go?” I asked. “Do you have a favorite store or anything?”

“I usually buy whatever catches my eye, so not really. Any suggestions?”

“Do I look like I’d have suggestions about where to shop for women’s clothes?”

“Don’t sound so proud about it, jeez. Now, where shall we go...?” Erin paused, pensively placing her hand to her chin. “Come to think of it, Roslia mentioned finding a nice boutique the other day. We could check it out.”

“Are you sure?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“I mean, we’re talking about a boutique *Roslia* likes...”

I figured it would bother her to visit another woman’s idea of a date spot, but...

“It’s fine! You haven’t been there with her yet, right? So I have to beat her to the punch! Then when she invites you, you can say, ‘Oh, I’ve already been there with Erin.’ Hit her right where it hurts! Pow! Two birds with one stone!”

Petty, but okay... I almost made a quip about it, but decided this wasn’t the time.

“If that’s really what you want,” I acquiesced instead.

“Then let’s get going!” she ordered, marching off triumphantly.

I silently followed after her.

Our destination was a boutique in the market district on the east side of town with female mannequins in the front window.

“Welcome!” a shop attendant called out to us when we entered.

The place was apparently pretty popular—there were young women and couples all over the store. Most of the clerks were already occupied with them, so Erin and I took a spin around for ourselves.

“Is there anything in particular you’re looking for?” I asked while eyeing a coat

on display.

The store was pretty large and had a wide variety of stock. If we didn't narrow down our browsing options, we'd easily be there all day.

"Hmm... Nothing really comes to mind. Like I said, I'm good on clothes."

"You don't need anything at all?"

"Maybe a new pair of socks?"

"..."

Well, this was a first. I'd never met anyone whose idea of a date was shopping for socks. I suppose it was partially my fault for insisting on going shopping when she didn't really need new clothes, but still... Who went straight to socks?

"Oh, here are some! Which do you think is better, the black or the white?"

I'd never seen someone do that either. She'd picked up two completely plain pairs of socks, so I wasn't even sure what to say.

"Er... Either is fine."

"That isn't very helpful, Note..."

But they're socks! Either is honestly fine!

How was this on me, anyway? She was the unhelpful one here! The better color would depend on what she was wearing any given day. They weren't that expensive either, so she should just buy both in the first place.

"Why don't we look at something else?" I suggested. "I'm at a loss here. Is there anything else you want to buy?"

"The only other thing I need is underwear—"

"Are you *trying* to embarrass me?!"

What gives?! Did she want me to pick out the underwear / wanted her to wear? How's a guy supposed to respond to that?

"Sorry. I don't normally go shopping with anyone, so I don't really know how this works... I've never had friends that would go out with me."

"Erin..."

I shouldn't have put her on the spot like that. Of course this was all new to her. I wasn't exactly a shopping expert myself, so I should've just let Erin do things her way.

"Fine, that's enough out of me. Come on, let's go. We can get underwear or whatever else you want."

"No, even I know I shouldn't be shopping for underwear with a guy..."

Really? Wasn't she raring to go pick something out just now? I was even prepared to pick white if she asked me to choose between black or white again...

"Are you disappointed, Note?"

"Nope. I know you were only joking," I replied as smoothly as possible. But truth be told, my burning cheeks were beet red.

"Then what's with that high-pitched voice? Are you perhaps—"

"Time to look at some clothes! Hey, isn't this coat cute?"

When in doubt, forcibly change the topic. That's the secret to getting out of predicaments like this.

"Well? How do I look?" Erin asked with a twirl.

We were currently in the middle of a dressing room fashion show, and Erin was trying on a pale yellow sweater. It was one of those tunic types that covered all the way down to her thighs. She had a nice figure to begin with, so simple clothes like this looked good on her. She'd probably look good in anything she wore, honestly.

"You look great," I answered her.

"That's all you've said so far," she pouted.

"Because you really are cute. I can't help that."

"Th-Thanks..." she squeaked, looking away and blushing.

I was kind of running my mouth without thinking, but that line was pretty cheesy, huh?

“Hey, how about this one?”

In order to dispel the awkward silence, I grabbed a nearby T-shirt. It was white with a strange octopus design on it. I hadn't really been looking when I picked it up, but it sure was hideous. Why'd they sell stuff like this? Wasn't this boutique supposed to be fashionable?

“What...? Isn't that kind of ugly?”

See? Even Erin was giving it the stink eye. I had to applaud her for agreeing to try it on anyway because I'd picked it out for her, but she really didn't need to force herself like that. Even I thought it was ugly.

“Hang on,” she said, pulling the dressing room curtain shut.

Welp, I figured there was no reason to stop her if she was so determined. I did kind of want to see Erin in an ugly T-shirt. Who would be the star of the show: Erin's cuteness or the shirt's hideousness? While she was changing, I didn't have much to do. As I was casually browsing clothes, I detected a familiar presence with Enemy Search.

“Hey, uh, Erin?”

“What? I'm in the middle of changing. If it isn't urgent, can you wait until I'm done?”

“It's not urgent, exactly... I was just going to tell you that it looks like Roslia is headed this way.”

“Wait, that's super urgent! Speak up sooner, would you?!” I could see the curtain fluttering as Erin panicked, although I didn't see the emergency for myself. “This'll turn out like it always does! She's going to barge in on our alone time and ruin everything again!”

“Ah, yeah...”

Okay, I knew what she was talking about now. That exact scenario happened the night we returned from floor 20.

“Which direction is she coming from, Note?!”

“Seems she's headed straight for us.”

“Ugh, why?! Is this some kind of test from God?! No, wait... She could still be going somewhere else. Surely she’s not coming to the same store—that would be too much of a coincidence.”

“Not to burst your bubble, Erin, but I get the feeling that’s exactly what she’s doing. You mentioned earlier that this is her new favorite boutique, right?”

“Yeah...”

“This is also her first day off in a while, so it only makes sense that she’d come today.”

“You don’t have to say any more... My day is already ruined...”

I watched the shoulders of her silhouette droop through the curtain like her soul had left her body. She even sounded like she was about to cry. At this rate, there wouldn’t be anything left of her for Roslia to tease by the time she got here. Erin and I had finally gotten a chance to spend some time together, just the two of us too... I wasn’t ready to give that up yet. Not that I was opposed to Roslia joining us, mind you. I just wanted to save the group hangout for another time.

“Mind if I try something, Erin? I have a plan.”

“What is it?”

“If I can hide us with Stealth—”

“Great idea!” Erin shouted.

I really wished she’d keep it down, though. Everyone in the store was now looking our way. We were attracting attention like this, not hiding from it.

“Get in here right now, Note!”

A hand reached out through the curtain and yanked me into the dressing room—right along with Erin in her underwear.

“Um, will you hear me out without getting mad?” I had to ask.

“About what?! Hurry up and use Stealth already!” she yelped.

“Before I do, do you want to put on some clothes?”

“Erk!”

Erin's arms flew up to hide her chest. But this wasn't my fault, okay? It was beyond my control, you hear me?

"Please don't get mad, Erin. You're the one who pulled me in here while you were changing—"

"I know... But it's still totally embarrassing, so don't look..."

"Ah, right..."

Erin bashfully hunched over. Her whole face was aflame, all the way to the tips of her ears. If I made the wrong move now, I'd be guilt-stricken even though this wasn't on me. I'd rather get yelled at than that, so I whipped around in a hurry, even though the image of Erin in her underwear was burned into my eyes. She was wearing my favorite color and everything...

I heard some rustling, then a weak voice say, "I'm dressed..."

"Then can I look now?"

"Yeah."

I opened my eyes to find Erin in the octopus T-shirt, but I still didn't know what to do. While it was through no wrongdoing on my part, I'd seen Erin in her underwear. I needed a way to break the silence, so I said the first thing that came to mind...

"Pretty ugly, right?"

"What?! You think my underwear is ugly?! Well, sorry for showing you something so unsightly!"

"No, not your underwear! That T-shirt! Your underwear was really nice!"

"You think so...?"

"Er, not like that! I'm just saying, objectively speaking, it wasn't ugly! It's not like I was looking *like that* or anything! Yup! It's not like I'm turned on or anything, so don't worry!" I frantically tried to defend myself.

"So you don't feel anything seeing me undressed...?" she muttered.

Uh-oh. Maybe I'd denied it a little too hard. It did kinda sound like I was saying she was unattractive... But what else was I supposed to say? This was

way too much for a lifelong bachelor like me.

“Sorry, I was lying. I’m actually pretty turned on.”

That was probably the wrong thing to say too, but screw it. It was all I could do to be honest. Erin could get as mad as she wanted—it was better than seeing her sad. I braced for her reply...

“Good.”

Huh, it seemed honesty was the best policy after all. I watched Erin sigh in relief and quietly did the same myself. But seriously, what was happening here? I was alone in a cramped dressing room with a girl who’d nearly been naked moments ago. On top of that, I had told her I was turned on and she *didn’t* react with disgust. Things were looking pretty rosy... It wasn’t just my imagination, was it? Erin had to realize how intimate this all was too, right?

While I was flustered, she quietly said, “Do you want to see it again, then?”

“...Can I?”

“If you want, yeah...”

Okay, it wasn’t just my imagination after all—I was sure of it now. Erin and I were definitely on the same page. There was no point in playing the gentleman and turning her down. So I answered for her sake, no, for mine...

“Then please—”

“Pardon me, dear customers! Please refrain from any acts of indecency in our store’s dressing rooms!”

Yeah, shoulda seen that coming. The store attendant who marched into the dressing room was fuming.

*

After shamefully leaving the boutique, we continued our date with an extra air of awkwardness. We tried out the latest sweets in town and finally returned to an empty house without any interference from Roslia, who came home some time later.

“Oh? You’re both back already?” she asked.

“Yeah...” I mumbled.

“I was so bored without you two around. We could’ve all gone shopping.”

“It’s not like Note and I were together or anything!” Erin shouted.

That unnecessary comment had me sweating bullets, but Roslia didn’t seem to catch on. She simply walked into the room and unloaded a large number of shopping bags.

“Oh my gosh, listen to this!” she then started. “I went shopping since it was my day off, and after hitting a few stores, I stopped by my favorite boutique.”

I silently stole a glance at the bags Roslia left on the floor. Yup. They were from the same boutique Erin and I had gone to on our first real date.

“I was chatting with one of the clerks, and she told me there was this couple in the store earlier.”

“Y-You don’t say...” I remarked, my voice trembling.

“She was so annoyed with them that she wouldn’t stop complaining. She said they did something totally outrageous, and you’ll never guess what!”

As the perpetrator in question, I knew *exactly* what—but I had to keep my mouth shut.

“Apparently, they tried to do the nasty in the dressing room! In the middle of the day, no less! There sure are some eccentric couples out there, huh? Just how wild did the dating scene in Puriff get while we were gone?”

Erin and I could only reply with dead silence.

“Huh, what’s the matter with you two? Normally you’d be jumping on my case and calling me a hypocrite right now...”

As the culprits, we couldn’t say anything lest we be the hypocrites. Of course, I’d take my crimes with me to my grave. Fortunately, it sounded like Roslia was none the wiser about the perpetrators’ identities, and fessing up wouldn’t benefit us in any way. All it’d get us was an earful from Roslia, and both Erin and I were perfectly happy to let the subject die here.

“That aside, Neme sure is late...” Erin muttered in a strained voice.

Hey, nice one! Her acting was a little unnatural, but not egregiously so. Roslia didn't seem to think anything of it.

"She said she'd be back this afternoon, right?" I asked. "She was just going to buy snacks."

"Then she probably went out for dinner with the kids again, right? It wouldn't be the first time," Roslia replied.

It was true that Neme was going out more often to meet up with Nacht and Fourie, but I distinctly remembered her saying that the Ultimate Invincible Partyz would be busy today. That was why she'd gone out snack shopping alone.

"Neme said the Ultimate Invincible Partyz was doing party stuff today," I explained.

"So what then? Did she get lost?" Erin asked.

"She's lived in this town longer than all of us, so I doubt it."

"That'd be Neme for you, though. No matter how much time passes, she never seems to grow up any."

"The fact that I can't argue is what scares me..."

That much was valid. It *was* Neme we were talking about. The same Neme who was too frightened to sleep alone after fighting ghost-type monsters in the dungeon. It was entirely plausible that she'd gotten lost.

"I'll try looking for her with Enemy Search," I offered, consulting my mental map while the girls chatted away for a bit.

"Maybe she was hit on and went out for a date?" Roslia suggested.

"Neme? No way," Erin replied.

"You never know. Puriff's a wild place right now. Maybe a predator picked her up!"

"You're overthinking it. I don't think Puriff is that bad either. That couple was probably just an exception, no?"

"Maybe, but still, you never know. Neme could be at a hotel as we speak!"

“Yeah, Roslia’s on the nose,” I said, rejoining the conversation after locating Neme’s presence.

“Wait, really?!”

“You’re kidding me! She’s climbing the stairs of adulthood before me?!”

What were these two so carefree for? Under normal circumstances, I might’ve stopped to remark to myself that Erin actually cared about that kind of stuff—but now wasn’t the time!

I hurriedly explained, “That’s not it. She’s at the hotel where Leyfa’s staying. In the very same room where I was confined.”

While we were out fooling around, Leyfa had made her move behind the scenes.

One Step Forward, One Step Back

With Erin and Roslia on my heels, I immediately headed for the hotel in the center of town. We ran up the stairs to the fifth floor, where I could sense Neme's presence. Three figures greeted us in the hallway—Leyfa, Sofie, and Gilbert the priest.

"Oh my. Good evening. What brings you here in such a rush?" Leyfa said coyly.

One glance was all it took to tell me she was responsible for this. There was no doubt she was behind Neme's disappearance.

"You know exactly what—"

"It's almost as though you've lost a party member or something."

"Tch..."

She was definitely doing this on purpose. There was no "almost" here; she'd taken Neme.

"Enough of your nonsense. Release Neme right now, or you'll get it," Erin declared, pointing her staff aglow with magical energy at the princess.

It was a rather confident display. Erin's nature inclined her to stand her ground even against other big personalities. Honestly, there were times I thought she was too quick to pick a fight, but I was sure glad to have her around right now. Erin didn't care if Leyfa was royalty or not. Sofie tried to interpose herself between them, but Leyfa dismissed her with a wave.

"How violent of you, Phantom Seventh Sage. Just what has you so on edge?" she asked.

"Return Neme right this moment!" Erin barked.

"Neme Pargin? She's one of your party members, if I recall. What about her?"

"We already know you have her! Hand her over!"

“How nasty. First you come barging in, then you accuse me of kidnapping with no evidence.”

“Don’t try to play dumb! Note can see everything with his Enemy Search.”

“That isn’t concrete proof. Can you really say it’s her with just Enemy Search? What if it’s all a misunderstanding on your part?” Leyfa asked with a challenging grin.

Erin clenched her fists around her staff and continued, “I told you I’d had enough of your nonsense already. If Neme’s not here, then prove it. Show us that room.”

“I think not. I haven’t cleaned up in there. Who wants to show guests to a messy room?”

“What an obvious ploy!”

“What if *you’re* the ones trying to pull one over on *me*? You could be using your missing party member as an excuse to get into my chamber and rob me blind. That certainly sounds like something poor adventurers would do.”

“You’d dare add insult to injury...? Okay, you asked for this! I don’t care if you’re a princess—I’ll show you what I can do! Your status can’t stop me!”

Magical energy pooled at the tip of Erin’s staff. She was seriously preparing to cast a spell. This was no joke—couldn’t the princess and her lackeys before us sense that? I looked at Leyfa to see the corner of her mouth turn up in a smirk.

“Hold on a minute!” Roslia shouted, stepping in front of Erin with her arms spread wide.

With her trajectory blocked, Erin aborted her spell and yelled, “Move it, Roslia! You’re in the way!”

“No. You’ve got to calm down, Erin. This is a trap,” she replied.

“How is this a trap? It’s problem solved if I fry her here and now!”

“And I’m trying to tell you that’s exactly what you can’t do! Don’t just stand there, Note! Help me stop Erin!”

“She’s right, Erin,” I interjected. “Let’s keep cool.”

“This is no time to ‘keep cool’! Neme was kidnapped, and this woman is trying to pick a fight with us! I’m not taking that lying down!”

“I’m with you there, but we need to hear what Roslia has to say first,” I said, stopping Erin by grabbing her shoulder. I then turned to Roslia and asked, “What were you saying about a trap, Roslia?”

“That Leyfa woman is trying to provoke us with that ridiculous attitude,” Roslia explained, looking up. “It’s a sly tactic that royalty, nobility, and other people in power like to use. When they want to dispose of someone of a lower rank, they try to incite them—and if the victim takes the bait, then it’s all the justification a higher-ranking noble needs to crush them for acting out. Arresting people on fabricated accusations can be tricky regardless of your status, so this is a way to pull a legitimate problem out of thin air.”

There, Roslia turned away from Erin to face the princess.

“You want Note to join your party, right?” she then continued. “Abducting Neme would only antagonize him, but it’s a power move. You wanted to force us to take matters into our own hands, complete with an attempted murder charge. That’s a felony if royalty’s involved, meaning a life sentence. So your plan was to step in and cut Erin a deal—she could join your party in lieu of hard labor. Does that about sum it up?”

“Huh... So there’s someone in your party with brains after all,” Leyfa scoffed.

“I’ve been around the block a time or two myself,” Roslia said with a glint in her eye.

I wasn’t sure what she meant by that last line, but I couldn’t have been more grateful for her in the moment. If she hadn’t intervened, we would’ve been royally screwed.

“You heard her, Erin. So please calm down,” I begged.

“Tch... Fine, but...”

“If you get arrested, Note would agree to anything in exchange,” Roslia added. “Do you want to put him in that position?”

“I don’t... Fine, I get it! I won’t do anything,” Erin finally agreed, shaking her

head and ruffling her hair as she took a deep breath to collect herself.

“Aww, and she looked the easiest to trick too...” Leyfa muttered.

“Who did you call easy, bitch?!”

“What did I just say, Erin? Calm down,” Roslia pleaded. “She thinks you’re easy because you snap back at everything right away.”

“I know that! It’s just reflex!”

I wanted to question that in exasperation, but thankfully it seemed like I could count on Roslia to keep a lid on Erin for now. I needed to figure out if Neme was okay.

“Your Highness, is Neme safe?” I asked.

“Why wouldn’t she be? As long as you behave, I’m sure she’ll be returned without a scratch. Of course, it’s not like I’m keeping her confined or anything—I’m just guessing out loud.”

It seemed Leyfa was intent on feigning her ignorance. Her pompous phrasing was infuriating, but losing my cool would mean defeat. That was exactly what she wanted me to do.

I composed myself as best I could and pressed her, “What will it take for you to give Neme back?”

“Do I have to spell it out for you? I have only one demand: join my party.”

“I already told you that’s impossible.”

“Then your friend may never come home.”

Damn it. The hand Leyfa played was cunning, but extremely effective. We couldn’t use brute force, nor could we ignore the fact that this was essentially a hostage situation. We were backed into a corner with no way out. Could we call the town guard to force their way into Leyfa’s room? No, that wouldn’t work. Leyfa had surely already accounted for that possibility. Her unflappable confidence likely meant she had the town guard in her pocket. No matter how much of a fuss we kicked up, they wouldn’t do anything for us. In other words, commoners like us were in over our heads. Without being able to rely on our abilities, we were pretty powerless. I didn’t see a way out of this mess.

“Will you return Neme if I agree to join your party, Your Highness?”

“Hmph. So you’ve finally come around, have you? I like people with good heads on their shoulders.”

“Hey, Note!” Erin barked.

“Hang on,” I said, raising a hand to quiet her. “I want to know if the princess will give Neme back then.”

“Of course. Completely unharmed.”

“I don’t trust you.”

“You have no choice but to trust me in that regard. Just so you know, as a candidate for the throne, I do show mercy to those who move in my favor.”

“What if I agree to join your party, then renege the moment you return Neme?”

“I likewise show no mercy to those who move against me. Do you still intend to go back on your word after hearing that?” she replied, looking almost like the devil.

A merciless mind, a cold personality, and the power to put it all to use—Leyfa Southerndall was a dangerous opponent indeed. We’d have to face her with extreme care. Despite her heavy-handed methods, part of me had wanted to believe she still had some good in her. That there was a line she wouldn’t cross. But I was wrong. This was the Tyrant Princess who’d plotted her own sister’s assassination. For her, killing me off would be a walk in the park. Erin, Roslia, Neme, and Force had come together for my sake, and now I was the reason it was all about to fall apart again. I couldn’t stand for that.

“Please give me a week, Your Highness. I’ll have a reply for you by then.”

“A week? How carefree of you when your party member’s been captured.”

“Our party leader is currently out of town. I can’t quit without giving him proper notice.”

“Hmm. All right, fine. I’ll give you one week.”

“And Neme—”

“Won’t be returned a moment sooner.”

“Tch...”

“Of course, she’ll be treated well. No harm will come to her, and I will make sure her stay is comfortable. As long as she doesn’t try to escape, that is.”

“I understand. Please keep your promise.”

“Just mind your deadline,” Leyfa said with a smug smile.

I was concerned for Neme, but I couldn’t cave here, so I shouted at the door, “Neme! Can you hear me?! Please hold on for a week! We’ll definitely be back to save you, so just stay calm and wait right there!”

There was no reply, but I had to believe my message reached her. The worst case scenario would be if she put up a fight and Leyfa decided to get rid of her early.

Just one week, Miss Neme. I promise I’ll be able to save you then...

“Is that all? If you’ve had quite enough, stop loitering in the hallway and leave. I’d like to get back to my room.”

“Yeah. Let’s go, Erin, Roslia.”

Leyfa’s demanding tone was infuriating, but lingering here wasn’t going to do us any good anyway. The princess had every advantage, and there was no way she’d let go of her hostage trump card. Thus we had no choice but to reluctantly head home.

*

After our wordless trip back to HQ, Roslia was the first to break the silence.

“What are we going to do, Note?!” she asked.

“That’s right!” Erin echoed, turning to me angrily. “You even gave us that one week time limit! We should’ve just put her in her place right then and there!”

“Erin, were you listening to what I said?” I asked in turn.

“I heard you! I know it was a setup! But we still could have crushed her to make sure she never challenged us again!”

“How barbaric can you be?! You think Leyfa would just quietly surrender after one beatdown? If anything, that’d only make her more determined to get payback.”

“Then what *should* we have done?! Are you saying there’s some other way to deal with her?!”

“That’s the rub...” Roslia said, casting a glance my way. She seemed to be wondering what I was thinking.

I said slowly and surely so as not to seem panicked, “Don’t worry. I’ll handle this.”

Roslia stared at me blankly. “How, though?”

I continued without answering her, “You two don’t need to do a thing. Just sit tight for a week. I’ve got a way to get Neme back for sure.”

“All by yourself, huh?” she asked dubiously.

“Yup. That’s what I’m saying.”

Roslia was at a loss for words.

In her place, Erin quietly mumbled, “You’re not going to give in to that woman, are you...?”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m asking if you plan on joining her party,” she clarified with a worried look. “Well? Answer me. I don’t want you quitting the Arrivers!”

“You don’t need to worry. I’ll make sure that doesn’t happen,” I replied, trying to assuage her fears.

Roslia then turned to me and asked, “What makes you so confident? What are you going to do? Erin and I are both worried... Won’t you tell us what you’re planning?”

I could tell she was genuinely concerned, but...

“Sorry, I can’t do that.” I could only reject her bluntly.

“What? Why?”

“I have my reasons.”

“Is telling us going to compromise your plan or something?”

“It’s not like that—I just can’t tell you.” I didn’t have a choice in the matter.

Frustrated by my vague answers, Erin grabbed my arm. “This concerns the entire party. It’s not something you have to shoulder yourself, you know? We can help you.”

“I know, and I hear you. It’s not that I don’t trust you guys. There are just extenuating circumstances.”

“Meaning there’s a reason you can’t tell us?”

“Yeah. I’m really sorry,” I said, looking Erin straight in the eye.

I was giving them the runaround on purpose, but I really did have my reasons. I had to stand my ground on this no matter what.

“We can trust you, right?” Erin asked, her eyes wavering as she looked back into mine.

I could only nod vaguely in return.

Wild Card

And so, one week passed. It was now the last day of our agreed-upon time limit. I departed the house early in the morning and headed off to see Leyfa. Force had returned to town yesterday, and we'd caught him up on the situation...but I'd left him and the girls at HQ. I was going to parley with Leyfa alone. The discussion we were about to have wasn't meant for the ears of the other Arrivers. The deal we were about to make was just that serious.

I arrived at the hotel where Neme was being held hostage. It was still early in the morning, so the main road was eerily quiet—an ominous prelude for what was to come. Whether I succeeded or failed here, what I prepared to do wasn't exactly praiseworthy. I couldn't blame anyone who'd judge me for it. Force and the others might scorn me for resorting to this too...but I had to do it. I had to save Neme.

"It's Note Athlon. I've come as promised," I announced as I knocked on the door to Leyfa's room.

It opened immediately. "You're finally here," Sofie the knight grumbled.

Waiting inside the room behind her were her liege, Leyfa Southerndall, as well as the former top-ranking inquisitor, Gilbert. Neme wasn't anywhere to be seen. Enemy Search revealed that she was still being held in the room next door. I could sense two other powerful presences with her, presumably Seventh Sage Mille and the Superior Strike Mastery skillholder that Leyfa had previously mentioned.

This was it. I was officially in enemy territory now. And fully surrounded to boot. A chill ran down my spine as goosebumps broke out all over my skin.

"Princess Leyfa, Note Athlon has arrived," Sofie reported.

"Let him in," Leyfa replied, shooting me a glance before recrossing her legs.

I stood head and shoulders above her seated figure, but it still felt like she was looking down on me somehow. The forbidding aura about her was

incredible.

“I assume the fact that you’re here means you’ve come to tell me what I want to hear.”

Her tone was as pompous as usual. Her cold, coy smile told me how assured she was of her victory.

“I don’t know if it’s what you want to hear, but I do have something to tell you,” I said, putting on the bravest face I could muster in hopes of being spared her condescension.

“You’ll tell me exactly what I want to hear if you know what’s good for you,” she replied, laughing off my bravado. “You wouldn’t want to see your friend hurt, now would you?”

She must have been in this situation a thousand times before. She wasn’t here to negotiate—she was here to strong-arm. Yeah, this was just extortion masquerading as diplomacy.

Leyfa’s unflinching gaze pierced through me. “So, what is it you have to say?” she asked.

“Well...” My mouth was parched from nerves, but I spoke carefully. “I have two demands: you return Neme, and you stop trying to recruit me. Of course, that includes no harm coming to any of my party members. If you can agree to that, I’ll sweep all of this under the rug.”

“Pfft! Aha ha!” Leyfa burst out laughing, slapping her thigh. “Of all the things you could have said! You want me to return your friend and simply leave you be? Who do you take me for? Do you even realize the situation you’re in?! I have your friend hostage and you’re completely surrounded, yet you think you’re in a position to be making demands? Even a child would know better.”

Leyfa must have found my reply hilarious, because she was still pointing at me and wheezing with laughter. She had to stop and catch her breath before continuing.

“What a shame, Note Athlon. It seems I overestimated you. Who would’ve thought you were such a fool? Bad children need to be disciplined. Sofie!”

“Yes, Your Highness,” the casually dressed knight replied.

“Eliminate Neme Pargin. Note Athlon doesn’t seem to think I’m capable of making good on my word. It’s time to teach him a lesson.”

“This is my final warning, Princess Leyfa,” I said stoutly. “I’ll let this slide if you stand down now. This is your chance to wash your hands.”

“Wow, you’re really going to keep up the act? Allow me to make things crystal clear for you.” Leyfa spread her arms and raised her voice. “Your friend is about to die, leaving you stranded here all alone—and you cannot defeat me on your own. Even if you summoned the other Arrivers here and now, you’d just barely have a prayer. And the minute you make a commotion, the town guard will come running. When that happens, you’ll be arrested for treason. Do you follow?”

“Of course.”

“Then—”

“I’ll repeat myself just this once—this is your last chance to back down.”

The circuitous nature of our conversation was getting under Leyfa’s skin. “Do you truly not understand what’s about to happen here?” she asked with a frown.

“I think you’re the one who doesn’t understand what’s about to go down. Now, if you still refuse to give up, I’m done here.”

With that, I turned my back to Leyfa. I walked right past her dumbfounded henchmen and unlocked the door to the room.

“You can’t—” she began to protest.

“Actually, one more thing.” I opened the door and stopped. “I forgot to give you something.”

“What?”

Leyfa glared at me in suspicion as I tossed an envelope her way. It slid across the floor, all the way up to the foot of her chair.

“What is this...?” she muttered, picking up the envelope—the black envelope.

“Surely someone of your repute should recognize that,” I replied.

“It can’t be...!” she gasped, hastily ripping it open. She then unfolded the letter inside and paled as she read it.

“Yeah, it’s exactly what you think it is. This is why I warned you. You had your chance to back down.”

“Note Athlon, you...” She crumpled the letter in her hand and slammed her fist on the armrest of her chair. “You’ve done it now!”



Leyfa was infuriated, and I didn't blame her. The tables had turned on her with a single letter. In this dramatic reversal, she'd been hurled from the precipice of certain victory into the pits of despair... She'd received a letter from the god of death himself, after all. The strongest assassin in the country. The mysterious, elusive, and impossible-to-detect Headhunter.

"Your villainous character really worked in my favor. Not only did you kidnap someone, you didn't hesitate to issue the order to take a life. Thanks to that..." I stared into her wide eyes. "You're dead now."

The wild card I'd secured in my match against Leyfa was a request I'd put in with my friend Hugel, AKA the Headhunter. He was a peculiar assassin who only targeted criminals and the like. He had incredible talent with the Stealth art, which allowed him to cut down his targets before they ever knew he was there. He'd made quite a name for himself as a so-called "hitman for justice." There was no way someone as wicked as Leyfa hadn't heard of him.

"When did you set this up? How?" Leyfa demanded, her brow furrowed as she looked back and forth between me and the letter. She seemed skeptical of my connection to the Headhunter.

"We're actually acquainted. It isn't that hard to get in touch with him."

The Headhunter had once come to kill Jin—and in the process of stopping him, I'd gotten to know him and learned his true identity. We then ran into each other again after I moved to the capital. So when I got a bad feeling after my first encounter with Leyfa, I'd asked Force for a favor before he set out. That, of course, was delivering a letter to Hugel and Eisha. I nearly panicked when Leyfa kidnapped Neme, but I'd managed to buy us enough time for Force to return with help.

"Are you serious?! You'd dare plot the assassination of a princess?!"

"You said it yourself, remember? I'm just like you. I'll do whatever it takes to achieve my goals."

It wasn't like I'd planned to kill Leyfa from the start. Originally, I'd only reached out to Eisha hoping she could dig up some dirt on the princess for me. But when Leyfa took Neme, she basically forced my hand. We weren't playing

around anymore. I knew if I didn't stop her in her tracks, Leyfa would never leave the Arrivers alone. She'd continue hurting them until I folded. I could've forgiven her for coming after me, but it was a different story when she messed with my party.

"Since you wouldn't back down, you left me with no choice. I'm not about to watch another one of my teammates die. So I'm prepared to end whoever it takes to protect them—even a princess."

I'd resolved myself to that back when Hugel came for Jin. I was prepared to kill him myself if he didn't back off, and this situation wasn't much different. I knew that I'd basically betrayed Hugel and Eisha by bringing them into it, though. After all the kindness they'd shown me, after pulling me up from my lowest low...I'd gone and asked them to do something so horrible. I wouldn't have been surprised if they'd wanted to cut ties with me over it, yet they'd agreed to help in spite of everything. I owed them more than I'd ever be able to repay.

"Princess Leyfa, have you considered the possibility it's fake?" Sofie asked, staring at the letter doubtfully.

Leyfa, gritting her teeth, muttered, "It's probably..."

Before she could finish her sentence, someone came running in from down the hall. Someone I'd seen before, actually—it was Mille Gundak, the Seventh Sage who could use Magic Sword Dance.

"Princess Leyfa! There's trouble!" she cried.

"What now? I'm busy!" Leyfa snapped.

Mille quickly blurted out, "Neme has disappeared! We looked away for a second, and she vanished right before us!"

"What?!" Leyfa yelled. Her gaze flicked to me.

"Guess the Headhunter's on the move, huh?"

For a man who could behead someone unnoticed, rescuing a hostage was a piece of cake. And now I had nothing to worry about. Leyfa could no longer retaliate by hurting Neme, and the authenticity of the letter was no longer in

question. In fact, Hugel's swift retrieval of Neme had driven the looming threat home quite nicely.

"I believe this is checkmate, Princess."

"Nghah!" Leyfa yanked at her hair with both hands. "Fuck! Fuck you, Note Athlon! I can't die here! I'd give my life for the throne, but I won't die before ascending it!"

Her fists were trembling with rage. She bit down on her lip, her face flushed in anger.

"What do you want?!" she shrieked. "What will it take for you to call him off? Money? Power? You name it!"

"Sorry, but I don't get anything out of leaving you alive. Who knows when you'll strike back for revenge?"

"Fine, then I swear it! I'll never approach you again! I'll give up on recruiting you! I won't seek revenge! I'll completely wash my hands of this! So please...!"

There was no sign of her cool confidence from before as she screamed in desperation. She almost seemed like a different person.

"Really? I don't think I can trust you," I pressed.

"I'm telling you the truth! What choice do I have?! I detest you, but I can't afford to die here! Not in the middle of my journey—not before I've reached the throne! I refuse to die with them looking down on me! I can't do it! I won't!"

Leyfa brought her fists down on a nearby table. The vase atop it tumbled to the floor and shattered. Tears of frustration filled Leyfa's eyes as she glared up at me.

"I hate you, Note Athlon! I'll resent this for as long as I live... But if that's what it takes *to* live, then pride be damned! I'll never forget this humiliation, but I'll back down! I'll just curse your name to my grave!"

Wow, the look on her face was really something. I'd never had anyone hurl that kind of animosity at me in my entire life. Getting rid of her here and now would be the easiest way to prevent any future hostilities, but I'd already made

up my mind. Before coming to the hotel, I'd promised myself that I'd call off Hugel if Leyfa promised to back down and thought I could believe her. That was the condition on my request to the Headhunter.

"All right. Then from this moment onward, you're never to lay a hand on me or my friends again. That's my only condition. If you honor it, I'll call off the assassination."

"I-I can trust you, right...?"

"As long as you uphold your end of the bargain. If you *ever* come for us again, I won't hesitate to call the Headhunter back. And if you think you can weasel your way out of this by killing me, think again—the Headhunter will know immediately if you do. Don't underestimate his information network. But if you're that anxious to take both of us out, be my guest."

"I'm not that foolish. I can suppress my hatred for you for the sake of my ambitions."

I could see something trickle from her clenched fist—she'd dug her nails deep enough into her own skin to draw blood. This woman was scary. Downright terrifying. I was starting to regret going about things this way, but it was the only plan I'd been able to come up with in time.

"I'll take your word for it, Princess Leyfa. Oh, and you're still free to pursue dungeon conquest all you like. As long as you don't interfere with us, I don't care what you do."

To be on the safe side, I decided to emphasize my lack of desire for further conflict. If I did anything else to push her, there was no telling when or how she'd lash out. I wanted to keep her enmity to the minimum possible level, even if it was only in vain.

Her shoulders slumped, her breath ragged, and her eyes cast downward, the princess finally uttered a truce, "Fine, Note Athlon... You have a deal."

With that, hopefully, the wargame between us was over.

Defeat

After leaving the hotel, I immediately returned to the Arrivers HQ. I took my shoes off at the front door and headed straight up to the second floor. When I walked into my room, I found Neme asleep on the bed.

“We got her back without issue. How did negotiations go?” asked a large man who appeared from the shadows.

Beside him was a bespectacled beauty with soft facial features. Meet Hugel and Eisha, the reinforcements I’d summoned from the capital. I’d asked Hugel to rescue Neme while I was parleying with Leyfa.

“Just fine. Thanks to your help, I think everything’s settled now. I honestly can’t thank you enough,” I replied to him.

“We let ourselves in without asking. Didn’t want to risk being spotted by one of Leyfa’s people outside,” he explained.

I’d additionally asked him to escort Neme back to HQ, but I hadn’t expected him to bring her all the way to my room. He and Eisha must have snuck inside with their arts—the other Arrivers on the ground floor had no idea they were here. As expected of the best assassin in the country, of course. I wasn’t sure there was anyone in the entire world who could match his skill with Stealth.

“Don’t think anything of it,” I said. “You’ve done far more than I could have asked you for.”

I clenched my hands and looked over at the sleeping Neme, her chest steadily rising and falling. I was just glad to see her breathing. She didn’t seem to be hurt either.

“She was already asleep when I broke in. Thanks to that, I was able to make it out without a fuss,” Hugel recounted.

“Good. I’m glad it wasn’t an ordeal for her. Really, I’m just glad she’s back safe.”

“Agreed. That alone made it worth assisting you.”

“Speaking of!” Eisha piped up. “Based on the information I gathered, she was treated well during her confinement. You have nothing to worry about. My data shows she ate so well off of room service that she actually gained three kilograms.”

Wait, how did Eisha know that? I knew she was a pro when it came to gathering information, but wasn’t that a bit *too* much?

“S-Sounds like it’s all good, then?” I said, unsure of myself. After causing so much trouble for Neme, I felt kind of guilty for learning something she definitely wouldn’t want me to know. Anyway, with that out of the way, I bowed my head to Hugel and Eisha once more. “Thank you again. I’m really and truly sorry for dragging the two of you into this.”

Hugel and Eisha were the only reason I’d been able to resolve things with Leyfa. They were the only way to stop her without any repercussions for the Arrivers. Even Leyfa feared what the Headhunter was capable of. But on the flip side, he was now in Leyfa’s crosshairs. She didn’t know his identity, but if she put in enough time and effort, she might be able to figure it out. The job I’d asked of them was nothing but a long list of risks for Hugel and Eisha, yet they’d accepted it graciously without a single complaint.

“We told you it’s okay. Don’t apologize anymore,” Hugel assured me.

“Even so, I’ll definitely repay you for this,” I assured him in turn.

“That isn’t necessary either!” Eisha cut in. “We decided to take this job voluntarily.”

“We originally had our eyes on Leyfa Southerndall anyway. I would’ve jumped on the first request that came in for her—it just happened to be from you. So don’t hang yourself up over it, Note.”

“Besides, it’s not like this doesn’t concern us at all.”

“That’s right. We were just cleaning up our own mess. You could also consider this an apology for that time I came after Jin.”

And now they were trying to make me feel better... How nice could these

people be? I was so grateful to call them friends. I knew they weren't good people in the eyes of society. Even if they limited their targets to other criminals, what they were doing still amounted to murder. But I didn't care what the rest of the world thought. I would always be on Hugel and Eisha's side after what they'd done for me. I wasn't in much of a position to criticize them anyway—I'd fully intended to slay Leyfa myself if she hadn't backed down. Thankfully it hadn't come to that, but my resolve was the same nonetheless. I was prepared to kill.

Leyfa had said I was the type to do whatever it takes for my goals, and she was probably right. If it was for the sake of my party members, for the sake of clearing the dungeon, I would do anything. Even if it meant being as savage as the Tyrant Princess, I'd do what I had to. I was certain of that. Perhaps that was why, now that everything was over, I felt a slight sense of kinship with her. I couldn't forgive her for taking Neme hostage, but if she really did end up on the throne one day, I wouldn't be too disappointed.

And so, if Leyfa meant to seize the crown by clearing the dungeon, I wasn't going to get in her way. She was free to do what she wanted. Rather than trying to sabotage each other, I hoped we could see one another as rivals working toward the same goal. That said, it was highly unlikely the feeling was mutual. She'd made it pretty clear she was holding a grudge...

"Mmrgh..." Neme groaned, rolling over in bed. I could see her stirring under the sheets.

"Looks like she'll be waking up soon," observed Hugel. "We'd better get going before we're found."

"Yes, we'll be taking our leave now. Sorry we couldn't hang around longer! Write to us if you ever find yourself in need again."

"Sorry for calling you here on such short notice. I know you must be busy. Let's catch up sometime."

"Definitely. Come visit us in the capital next time."

"I'll cook something good to eat if you stop by our house!"

With that, Hugel and Eisha waved as they disappeared through the door. It

looked as though they were leaving normally, but no one noticed them thanks to Hugel's incredible Stealth.

I couldn't reveal the Headhunter's identity to anyone—not even my own party members. There was no telling how the secret might get out. For the sake of everyone involved, I had to keep it on a strictly need-to-know basis only. That was why I hadn't been able to let any of the other Arrivers in on my plan. But all's well that ends well, right? They had to forgive me for that... Right?

I realized that I'd basically taunted them by not telling them what I was doing and insisting on handling everything on my own, so I couldn't shake the feeling I was going to be pressed for answers later. How was I supposed to explain myself, much less how I'd gotten Neme back? How on earth was I going to spin this without mentioning the Headhunter?

Everything had worked out, but in the end, I was so worried about what was to come that I couldn't relax at all.

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When was the last time the princess ever felt this much anger toward someone? Was it her sheltered older sisters? Her imbecile father? The prime minister after attempting to banish her?

"Argh! Shit! Curse you, Note Athlon!" Leyfa Southerndall yelled as fiercely as the fury swirled in her chest. "Making a fool out of me! Fuck!"

She slammed her fists into the desk repeatedly. One of the legs had already cracked, giving it a terminal lean to one side. There were bruises on both her hands too, but despite that, the pounding strength she put into them didn't wane.

"How could you bring the Headhunter into this?! That's foul play!"

She had underestimated Note Athlon. She'd presumed that they shared a similar determination to see their goals through; what she *hadn't* expected was for him to be so determined that he was willing to kill even her. Being deviously crafty was the princess's greatest weapon—one she'd mistakenly assumed belonged only to her.

But she was wrong. Note Athlon was devious himself. He showed no mercy to

those who stood in his way. The princess saw fire in his eyes, and she wanted that. He would be the perfect retainer to have by her side as she pursued the throne. And now that she'd lost her chance to snare him, she smoldered with resentment.

The princess could no longer lay a hand on Note Athlon as long as she lived. Unless she wanted to be targeted by the Headhunter, that is. With the list of evil deeds to Leyfa Southerndall's name, the so-called "hitman for justice" would consider her natural prey. He was a phantom assassin who appeared out of nowhere and left naught but decapitated corpses in his wake. No matter how many bodyguards were hired or how public the venue was, heads would go flying with no resistance. Not even the victim would realize what had happened, much less the guards.

He was basically an urban legend—a real one with a deadly record. His calling card was a warning that came in a black envelope. Those who received it lived in dread, ruing their crimes until the moment of their execution. Though he was hailed as a hero of poetic justice by the public, he was an agent of sheer torment to his targets.

And from now on, the princess would be living in fear of him. She'd never know a good night's sleep again. The fact she'd hired the strongest war priest as a bodyguard didn't matter. Gilbert wouldn't be able to save her from the Headhunter's surprise attack. It was an unnatural phenomenon that no one would ever see coming.

"Please compose yourself, Princess Leyfa." Sofie grabbed Leyfa's arm to stop her from striking the desk. Her brow was furrowed with worry. "You'll injure yourself. Please calm down."

"Who could stay calm in this situation?! I'm now a target of the Headhunter's!"

"I know... But Note Athlon said he'd rescind the assassination request if you backed off. There's no immediate threat, is there?"

"You don't get it. You have no idea what it means to catch the Headhunter's eye."

Ah, how infuriating. Both this situation and this dim-witted subordinate. Why

did the princess have to explain every little thing out loud?

“From this moment onward, I can no longer use underhanded schemes to seize the throne. In order to make sure I don’t harm Note Athlon, the Headhunter will be watching me. If I commit any crime—against Note Athlon or otherwise—I’ll just be giving him a reason to make a move. This incident has basically restricted me to legitimate means only.”

Leyfa Southerndall’s plotting had all been in vain. She’d endeavored to recruit Note Athlon to complete her dungeoneering team. She wasn’t dead set on him specifically. The best case scenario was for him to agree to join, but in the event it didn’t work out, finding another Mapping holder wouldn’t prove too difficult. The princess had even prepared a backup plan in case things with Note fell through. But now not only had she lost Note, she had the Headhunter bearing down on her too. It was the worst possible outcome.

The Headhunter’s attention put the throne further out of her reach. If she couldn’t rely on her trademark schemes to seize it, it might now forever elude her. This tiny little incident had blown up in such a fashion that removed her from her greatest desire. Part of the blame fell on herself for letting her guard down, but she still couldn’t stifle the rage it inflamed within her.

“My apologies...” Sofie bowed her head over her own incompetence. It was an apology with no sincerity behind it—a mere formality.

One that only inspired Leyfa’s fury further.

“Don’t give me that!” the princess railed. “Apologies aren’t going to fix anything!”

“Yes, Your Highness! I’m sorry!”

“Argh! You’re so useless!” Leyfa tore at her hair. Why was her knight always like this? “This is all your fault! Do you not even realize that?!”

“This is all my fault...?”

“Are you daft? The reason the Headhunter came up at all is because of you!”

“Yes, I have repented deeply for letting Note Athlon escape the first time...”

“That’s not what I’m talking about!”

Useless. Utterly incompetent. Leyfa had kept the knight in her charge because of her loyalty, but she'd never expected her to be so worthless. First and foremost, she was too simple-minded. She only ever did as she was told—a puppet with no initiative. She had no means of coping with situations that orders did not cover. And whenever she did something with good intentions, it normally ended up backfiring. Leyfa had figured she could take advantage of that to have a subordinate indebted to her, but it seemed she'd made a terrible choice.

“It's true that if you hadn't let Note Athlon escape the first time, we wouldn't be in this predicament. If we'd settled things before he summoned the Headhunter, we'd be free of the problem. But I'm talking about even before that!”

“What do you mean, Your Highness?”

Sofie didn't yet realize what Leyfa was referring to—the grave mistake she had made. The princess continued to seethe over it...for if Sofie hadn't acted of her own accord, the Headhunter never would've entered the picture.

“You still don't understand what you've done...”

“What exactly have I done, Your Highness?”

“Don't play the fool! I'm talking about the biggest blunder you've ever made!”

Leyfa was just going to have to spell it out for her like everything else. As so she began berating her useless attendant, Sofie Deanlurk...

“You asked the Headhunter to kill Jin! That's the only way Note Athlon would know the Headhunter! The Headhunter went to kill Jin, met Note Athlon, and for some unfathomable reason, gave up on the assassination! It all adds up! If we trace it back to how this got started, it's all because of your narrow-minded actions!”

The World Wasn't Kind to Me

The happiest days of my life were already over. It was only downhill from here. Like a throwaway match that was decided beforehand, I was just waiting for the end. Up until five years ago, I'd believed my life would be something brilliant. The world was bright and cheerful, colorful beyond my wildest imaginings. In other words, I was a sheltered child with no knowledge of the real world.

I was born to the famous House Deanlurk. As their only daughter, my parents always doted on me. My father would buy me anything I asked for—fancy dresses, shiny shoes, sparkling jewelry, anything at all. I loved showing them off to my friends and the servants of our mansion. I loved being called cute. Whenever someone complimented the things my father bought me, it felt like they were complimenting him too. It filled my heart with warmth.

As for my mother, she was a beautiful and kind woman. She often braided my hair for me. Whenever I had a nightmare, she'd give me hugs and sleep by my side.

"Sofie..."

She always had a smile on her face when she called my name. Her voice just radiated affection. I loved my name because of her. I adored both of my parents. Everyone else in the mansion was wonderful too. The servants always greeted me whenever I passed them in the hallways. They'd even sneak me treats. They must have been busy with work themselves, but they still made time to play with me when I was bored.

Yet all that happiness came to an abrupt end with the death of my father. It was no ordinary death, mind you. He was murdered—by an assassin he'd raised himself.

As it turned out, my father was a terrible person. I only learned this following his death. I was once so proud to be his daughter, but his dealings in the shadows were sick. He adopted orphans for cheap, stripped them of their

human rights, and forced them through harsh combat training in the name of creating soldiers to act as his own personal pawns. It was one of those very pawns who'd turned against him in the end.

After my father was murdered and his deeds exposed, everyone began treating us differently. The people who were previously so kind to me now condemned my father. They even started censuring my mother. Some of those very same people had received assistance from my father in the past. They were treated well, but you'd never know by the awful things they were saying now.

I couldn't forgive them. Didn't they understand my father had been murdered? Why were we the ones treated like criminals? My father had done plenty of good deeds too, yet those were all suddenly forgotten. People said whatever they could to paint us as the villains. It was pitiful. Thankless.

My mother had been aware of my father's dark dealings, but she still lost her beloved husband. She lost her status as a noble too, and the rest of the world talked behind her back. It drove her mad. Reality became too difficult to bear. She tried to take both of our lives.

"Let's go together, Sofie..."

She called my name like always, but her usual smile was no longer there. I was terrified. It was like my mother was no longer herself. I made a break for it, shoving her aside with all my might.

How? Why? What had changed my mother so? Where was my father now?

In the end, my mother died alone. I regretted it afterward. Instead of abandoning her to such a lonely demise, I should have gone with her after all. There was nothing left for me to live for anyway. Dying would have made no difference. My mother had always been my greatest ally, but I spurned her when she needed me the most.

And so I found myself alone. My last ally was gone. I was utterly forsaken. I was given to complete despair. All the happiness and light had withered from existence. Only a dull life awaited.

The world was not kind to me.

I met Princess Leyfa in the throes of my despair. She alone approached me when the rest of the world shunned me.

“You’re the Deanlurk girl, aren’t you?”

I thought she too was going to ridicule my family. I couldn’t take it anymore—I didn’t want to listen with my jaw clenched any longer. I wanted to snap back at her. But she surprised me.

“Your father was an impressive man. I considered making him my subordinate, so it’s a shame how things turned out.”

Princess Leyfa only saw people as puppets. Her esteem of him was solely based on his value as a pawn, but it still made me happy. It was the first time anyone had spoken highly of my father since his passing. It felt like a small ray of hope. The world was unkind to me, but maybe living a few days longer wouldn’t hurt.

After that, I became one of Princess Leyfa’s retainers. She wasn’t kind by any stretch of the imagination. She did whatever it took to get what she wanted. The idea of committing evil didn’t faze her in service of her ambitions. Unlike my father, who was a different man at home, Princess Leyfa had no good side. Vicious was simply her nature. But that didn’t scare me away from her.

I was different from those ungrateful servants who’d turned on my father once they learned of his wrongdoings. I would follow Her Highness forever. No matter what. Even if the world shunned her, I would remain by her side. I didn’t want to regret abandoning anyone ever again.

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“This is all your fault! It’s because you selfishly contacted the Headhunter!”

A coffee cup came flying at me. I didn’t move out of the way.

“Avenging your father? Who cares about that! How dare you chase some irrational revenge plot when you should only be acting for my sake?!”

Princess Leyfa was right. I had caused her a great deal of trouble. I had pledged myself to her, yet here I was getting in the way of her ambitions. You

see, I'd accidentally stumbled upon a way to send a request to the Headhunter while I was abetting one of Her Highness's schemes. I heard about it through an informant.

The knowledge inspired a singular desire within me. My father's killer... I wanted him brought to justice. So before I knew it, I'd made an assassination request. Princess Leyfa reprimanded me at the time too. She told me not to act on my own—to think before I moved.

Eventually, the Headhunter contacted me. He informed me that my father's murderer was a man named Jin, a member of an adventuring party known as the Arrivers. He also informed me that he was withdrawing from my request to assassinate him. That the job was too risky.

When I learned this, a part of me was relieved. Assassins shouldn't be hired so lightly on impulse. Murder was wrong. I still couldn't forgive my own father for what he'd done. I'd come close to doing it myself many a time under Princess Leyfa's orders, but I was still self-aware enough to know it was immoral. So to have my first real murder plot end in failure unburdened my heart immensely.

However, through hiring the Headhunter, I learned a great deal of information about the Arrivers—including the previously unknown fact that Mapping could be used in dungeons. I saw a glint in Princess Leyfa's eye when I shared this with her. I could tell she was planning something, and shortly thereafter, she began gathering her own dungeoneering team. It was around the same time that I heard Jin, the object of my vengeance, lost his life on floor 21.

"You're always like this. I keep you around because you have good abilities, yet everything you do backfires on you. You're so useless."

I didn't need to be told that. I was more keenly aware of it than anyone. No matter what I tried, my efforts were never rewarded. *Why was I so hopeless?* I must have been born under an unlucky star, fated to suffer misfortune forever. It was the only explanation.

"You should know I have no patience for worthless pawns."

"Yes, Your Highness..."

This made two strikes against me. The first was letting Note Athlon escape on my watch. And now it turned out my assassination request had given him a connection to the Headhunter. That was the second. Her Highness never forgave anyone who hit their third.

“I shall handle myself better next time,” I assured her.

“There is no next time. I’m washing my hands of Note Athlon. With the Headhunter in the picture, I cannot give in to the temptation of retaliation. As much as it vexes me, Note Athlon was right. I have no choice but to quietly continue my dungeon conquest.”

Princess Leyfa chewed at her nails in irritation. Yet just as I thought things were beginning to quiet down, the doorbell rang out of the blue.

“A visitor? Who would come at a time like this? Hurry up and deal with it, Sofie.”

“Right away,” I replied, opening the door to find an unfamiliar blonde half-elf scratching her head.

“Um, hi! I’m looking for someone called Leyfa Southerndall, I think? Could I maybe meet her?”

Who is this insolent woman?

I snapped at her, “Identify yourself. You can’t just show up here uninvited.”

“Oh, me? My name’s Miya Line. I heard that this Princess Leyfa person was going around gathering super strong members for a dungeon party, so I came to volunteer myself.”

I turned to Her Highness in deference.

She let out a tired sigh. “Who is this clown? Are you here for a laugh?”

“I’m not here to laugh at anything! I’m totally serious! I actually moved to town just the other day. I’m an adventurer, so I wanna try out the dungeon—but if I’m going to join a party, I want it to be the strongest one. So when I heard you were going to try your hand at the dungeon too, I came to find you because it sounds like a good fit!”

“Hahh...” Princess Leyfa held her head in her hands, rubbing her eyes. “How

can so many annoyances drop by in a single day...? Sofie!”

“Y-Yes, Your Highness?” I replied, straightening my back. She only used this menacing tone of voice when she was seriously angry.

“Kick this jester to the curb,” the princess ordered.

“Huh?! Why?! I’ve only given my name so far! Shouldn’t you at least ask about my qualifications or something first?!” the half-elf woman squealed.

“I’m in a bad mood right now,” the princess hissed. “Don’t make me repeat myself.”

“Just listen! I’m strong—stronger than anyone else you’ve got! I can promise you that!”

“Oh...?” Princess Leyfa smirked as though she’d heard something amusing. “Fine. Let’s see you prove it. Fight Sofie here. If you win, you can join the party.”

“Really?! Thank you so much!” The half-elf bounced up and down with an innocent smile.

Princess Leyfa then stood up and made to leave. She put on her coat, then whispered into my ear as she walked past, “Beat her into a pulp, Sofie. Make her regret that flippant attitude of hers.”

“B-But—”

“No buts. Do it. You know what’ll happen if you lose, right?”

I gulped. Her Highness had given me an order, but Supreme Appraisal revealed every last one of this woman’s skills to me. She was blessed with Superior Bow Mastery, Major Physical Boost, and Protection of the Forest Spirit King. They were all top-class skills that I knew I didn’t stand a chance against. Her skillset alone surpassed Gilbert’s. You only saw this kind of prodigy once a generation.

“Jeez, first Note and then that Force guy... I’ve been on a real losing streak lately, so I *have* to win this. Otherwise I’ll seem like some kind of background character!”

While she was muttering such things to herself mindlessly, I despaired. I knew what was to come, for the world was unkind to me. Why did a monster like this

have to show up now? Why did God see it fit to test me with such trials?

This was the worst. If only she had come a day earlier, or even a day later. Things wouldn't have been so bad if Princess Leyfa weren't in such a foul mood. If I lost when she was in such a state, then I'd almost certainly be...



On this day, I reached my third strike.

Ghost in the Rain

“Man, it’s still pouring...” I muttered to myself, staring out the window early the next morning after my showdown with Leyfa.

The rain had started coming down last night. Water was collecting outside in pools rather than puddles, and there was no sign of the precipitation stopping any time soon. Raindrops were hitting the plants in the garden so loud that I could hear it from inside.

“Too bad. Guess we won’t be running today,” said Neme, who was likewise staring out the window.

It was rare for a late riser like her to be up at this hour. From what I understood, she’d put on some weight while she was held hostage at the hotel, and she wanted to lose it by accompanying me on my morning runs. Now, I said she was held hostage, but it was really more like she was on house arrest. As long as she didn’t put up a fight, her captors let her live comfortably. She wasn’t allowed to leave her room, but she got treated to fancy hotel food. Basically she was eating and sleeping, eating and sleeping. So, yeah, by the time she came home, Neme was a little rounder than before.

Since her house arrest stint had been so accommodating, however, she wasn’t particularly traumatized by the event. If anything, Force asking if she’d gotten fat was more of a shock than anything. He may have cut back on his skirt-chasing, but his lack of delicacy certainly hadn’t improved any. Anyway, that was how Neme had ended up resolving to start a diet.

“Maybe Neme will try again tomorrow. Goodnight.”

And so Neme sleepily began to wander back toward her room. That was it. Her diet was over in a matter of seconds.

“Yeah, you say that now, but you definitely won’t do it tomorrow either,” I chided.

“You’re right, the ground will still be slippery from the rain tomorrow. Neme

will try again the day after that.”

“At least give it one day. I know it’s hard to stick to an exercise routine, but you haven’t even started yet.”

“Neme isn’t even fat in the first place! Force was just saying things.”

“But you put on three—”

I almost let my top-secret intel slip, but there are times in life where things are better left unsaid. Unlike a certain insensitive party leader, I knew when to keep my mouth shut.

“Force can’t be trusted anyway!” she continued. “He said he’d come back with a new party member, but he didn’t bring anyone!”

“He already said it was because he couldn’t find a good candidate.”

It seemed Neme was holding a grudge for being called fat. She clenched her fists and railed, “That means he basically just went to the capital on holiday! It’s unfair! Neme wants to go on a trip and eat lots of yummy food too!”

Never mind. She was driven by her appetite, not a vendetta. She really had no intention of going on a diet, did she? Well, whatever. It was her choice whether she gained or lost weight. So long as it didn’t affect our dungeon runs, that is.

“How about we visit the capital together sometime? I lived there for a bit, so I can show you where all the good restaurants are.”

“You’re a genius, Note! It’s a promise!”

Neme suddenly began beaming from ear to ear. I’d only suggested it to console her. I hadn’t thought I’d get this kind of reaction. Maybe it was a pretty good idea after all? We’d never had the opportunity to go on a real vacation as a party. It’d be a fun way to bond.

As I considered it, I felt a presence approaching HQ. Moments later, there was a heavy rapping at the front door.

“What is that? A ghost?” Neme shrank back, grabbing my sleeve.

“Don’t worry. I’ll get it.”

I made Neme wait in the living room and then headed down the dimly lit

hallway. I knew it wasn't a ghost on our front step. It was most certainly a person. I unlocked the door and pulled it open to reveal a lone hooded girl drenched by the rain.

"Note Athlon..." she muttered.

Indeed, it was a perfectly normal human girl, alive and breathing...yet she really and truly did look like a specter.

"You're Sofie, right?" I asked.

This was Leyfa's attendant, if I recalled correctly, but she seemed different. Her black hair was muddy and eyes were like voids. Her mouth was strained unnaturally, and her breaths came out trembling. She practically looked like a different person. It was frightening.

"Finally... I've found you..." she kept muttering.

"Why were you looking for me?" I asked.

"Isn't it obvious? To kill you..." Sofie inhaled a sharp breath. "I'm going to kill you! For Her Highness! For myself...!"

Then came a glint of light—her sword was sailing toward me.

"Wuh?!"

I twisted my body to dodge it in the nick of time. Sofie was positively radiating bloodlust, so her attack didn't really surprise me. Her sword arm was slow too. She'd been much sharper the first time we fought. Her strike just now relied entirely on brute strength. There was no way a sword swung with hatred alone would ever touch me.

I took two steps back using Withdraw and adopted a fighting stance. I didn't have my spell-infused gloves on me, and I was still in my pajamas. But against a deranged opponent like this, I didn't have much choice...

"I'll get you, Note Athlon!"

Sofie charged into the front hall, tracking in the mud. I evaded her heavy lunge and threw a Palm Shot at her abdomen.

"Ugh!"

I could tell I'd landed a solid blow. It didn't seem particularly effective, but the impact sent her backward. It gave me a chance to land two more blows—a Palm Shot to her shoulder and sternum. That knocked her back out of the door.

“Did you really come here just to do this?!” I shouted. “Just so you know, this is legitimate self-defense!”

Really, what was she thinking? She was seriously trying to kill me. Had Leyfa sent her? Did she think my warning about the Headhunter was just a bluff? No... This was far too sloppy for a genuine murder plot. What kind of assassin knocks on your door first? If I knew Leyfa, she'd be much more discreet.



Moreover, there was something strange about Sofie. She was unhinged. She wasn't hearing anything I said, and she was muttering through ragged breaths. Her eyes were unfocused as well. What on earth had happened? Had she come here on her own? It wasn't impossible, but why would she do that? Why was she trying to kill me?

"Do you realize what you're doing?" I had to ask. "You attacking me will be seen as a sign of aggression from Leyfa. You haven't forgotten about the Headhunter, have you?"

"I don't care about that anymore. I'm going to defeat you and redeem myself."

Redeem herself? I'd initially suspected that misfortune had befallen Leyfa, driving Sofie to suspect me or the Headhunter, but it no longer seemed that was the case. What could it be, then? I didn't understand Sofie's reasons, and she clearly had no intention of explaining. She wasn't in her right mind, leaving me no choice. It was fight back or die.

I quickly slipped on my shoes by the front door, preparing for combat. I couldn't get any good traction in socks alone. Sofie staggered to her feet, glaring at me all the while.

"I will defeat you. No matter what," she hissed.

"If you come at me again, I won't show any mercy. I still owe you one for last time."

I squared off. There was no room for negotiation here—Sofie rushed straight at me. It was a tactless charge, and a wild one thanks to the slippery mud. It'd be hard *not* to dodge this.

"Hah!"

I evaded her by stepping to the side. I then fired a Palm Shot to keep her at bay, but she just kept charging. I followed up with a second, then third shot.

"What?! Whoa!"

I should've had a landslide advantage, yet Sofie continued to come at me undaunted. She was taking blow after blow without losing momentum. It was

almost like fighting a zombie. Were my attacks ineffective against her? I was sure Palm Shot was hitting her...

She wasn't going to die at this rate, was she? I'd struck her enough times now that I was seriously starting to worry, yet her reckless charge persisted. Was she *trying* to kill herself? She seemed to have no regard for her own life.

I heard her mutter something to herself, and just then—

“Ah...”

The ground beneath my feet softened. One leg sunk into the soupy mud, throwing me off balance.

“Magic?! Oh crap—”

Had she just cast a spell with no catalyst and no gestures? Was it spirit magic? As I was struggling to get a grasp of the situation, Sofie tackled me without mercy. She threw all her weight at me, knocking us both to the ground.

“Agh!”

Sofie pressed down on me and grabbed my shoulders. She then shook me violently, slamming me into the mud repeatedly.

“You...!” She raised a fist aloft. I thought that this would be the end of me. Hollow eyes stared down at me. I couldn't tell if the droplets falling from her face were rainwater or tears. “Note Athlon...”

The next moment, Sofie stopped moving completely. She collapsed like a puppet cut from its strings, falling atop of me as if to pin me down.

“Hey, Sofie?”

I called her name, but there was no response. I tapped her on the cheek. No reaction at all.

“You okay? Hey!”

When I touched her face, I realized she was burning up. I could feel a feverish heat coming off of her even in the cold rain.

“Hey, what happened? Hang in there!”

I shifted her off of me, then gently laid her down on the ground. How had she

been fighting when she was this sick? A normal person would've struggled to even walk. If I left her alone, I'd be leaving her on death's door. I wound an arm around her shoulders and lifted her up. How long had she been out in the rain? Her clothes were completely soaked, to the point that water was freely flowing from the seams.

As for her body, she was practically lifeless. Her dead weight sunk downward like the earth was trying to take her. Thankfully, we were just outside HQ. Getting her to safety wouldn't be too hard. We needed to get out of the rain ASAP. I couldn't let her get any worse than she already was. Neme should still be awake, so she could help heal Sofie and give her a dry change of clothes.

Hahh... Why was I helping someone who'd just tried to kill me?

Well, what else was I supposed to do? I couldn't abandon her here. I may be the kind of guy who does whatever it takes to achieve his goals, but that didn't mean I'd callously ignore someone in need. I'd save anyone I could so long as it didn't put me or my party members in danger, and I definitely wasn't getting that vibe from Sofie right now.

And so I went back inside, escaping the pouring rain with the lone knight over my shoulder.

The Weakened Knight

“What in the world?” asked a wide-eyed Erin when she got up.

It was currently seven in the morning—right around the time the party usually gathered downstairs for breakfast. And Erin’s surprise was perfectly understandable. A feverish Sofie was sprawled across the sofa in the living room, after all.

After what had happened, I’d immediately brought her inside and called Neme to heal her wounds from our fight. Healing magic didn’t do anything for her fever, however. I knew her condition would only worsen if we left her in her sopping wet clothes, so I’d also asked Neme to help her get changed and under a blanket. I was hoping she’d recover with some rest, and I planned on questioning her once she was back to health.

To my amazement, Neme didn’t have a single complaint about caring for Sofie, one of her captors from the hotel incident. They’d apparently gotten the chance to know each other a little, so Neme didn’t bear her any ill will. She told me that she’d talked to Mille even more than Sofie, however, and she happily recounted for me how the Seventh Sage had kept her entertained.

“Neme made a new friend!” she reported with delight.

It sounded like she’d had it pretty good while we were all busting our butts to rescue her... Oh well. It was better than any harm befalling her, and it wasn’t like Neme making friends was a bad thing. It was actually almost funny to see how affable our shy little Miss Neme had become. Of the girls in our party, she might’ve actually had the biggest social circle at this point.

“I know you always do your own thing, Note, but you mind explaining this?” Erin asked, nodding toward Sofie.

Wait, don’t get the wrong idea! I know I went to negotiate with Leyfa on my own and settled things without ever explaining myself, but I promise you this wasn’t part of my plan! I don’t know what’s going on here either!

“I’m just as clueless as you are,” I told her. “She attacked me out of nowhere, then collapsed with a fever mid-fight. I couldn’t just leave her lying out in the street, so I brought her inside.”

“Why did she attack you? You said everything was settled.”

“I thought it was, so I’m kind of at a loss here. She was acting weird, though... Almost deranged.”

“In other words, not even you saw this one coming.”

“Yeah. We won’t know what’s up until I talk to her, but given the state she’s in...”

I looked over at the sleeping Sofie. Her breathing was still labored. I didn’t think she’d be up for a conversation any time soon.

“Good morning, everyone! My, what do we have here?” Roslia called as she came downstairs.

“Yeah, what’s everyone doing in the living room?” Force likewise asked. Their attention naturally fell on the sleeping stranger on the sofa when they entered the room. “Hmm? Who’s this?”

“Hey, I know her!” Roslia piped up. “That’s the girl who tried to kidnap Note! She’s one of the bad guys!”

“For real?” Force asked.

“She’s let her guard down in enemy territory! Let’s get her! Hiyah!”

“C’mon, don’t assault her.” I stopped Roslia from pantomiming an attack, then gave her and Force the rundown too. Not about what happened with Leyfa, of course, but rather what had transpired with Sofie earlier this morning.

“I still dunno what’s really going on here...” Force mumbled.

“Let’s smack her awake and ask, then!” Roslia suggested.

“Stop trying to resort to violence.” I thwarted her second attempt at an attack. I was sure she was just horsing around, but I still had to worry—this was Roslia, after all. “Why don’t we just let her be until she wakes up?”

“Yeah, that’s probably for the best,” Force assented.

So, with our leader's approval, we all began playing the waiting game.

It wasn't until that evening that Sofie finally woke up. I heard a commotion coming from the first floor and went downstairs to find a flustered Erin and Roslia on either side of the knight, who'd struggled to her feet and was staggering unsteadily. She quickly lost her balance and fell back onto the sofa.

"You shouldn't push yourself too hard," Erin warned her.

Ignoring the advice, Sofie tried to stand again. When she looked up and saw me in the doorway, she muttered, "Note Athlon... Why are you here?"

"You don't have to glare at me like that," I responded. "I won't attack you or anything. This is Arrivers HQ, by the way."

"Your headquarters...?"

"You gave me a scare when you suddenly collapsed in the middle of our fight earlier. You had a fever and were completely unresponsive, so I brought you inside."

"You...did all this for me...?" she asked, glancing down at the unfamiliar outfit she was in and then the towel that had fallen to the floor.

"Not *all* this!" I quickly denied any involvement in that part. "Neme was the one who helped you get changed."

"Oh, the dwarf girl..." Sofie mumbled, nodding. She then forced herself to her feet again and started stumbling toward the door. "Tell her thanks for me."

"You really shouldn't overdo it. You can barely even walk like this. How about you rest a little more before—"

"I can't cause you any more trouble than I already have."

"Then at least let me take you back to the hotel."

When she heard those words, Sofie froze in her tracks. Her face twisted in grief. "I...can't go back there anymore. I don't have anywhere to go..." she sobbed, tears rolling down her cheeks.

Wait, what? I held back my own panicked confusion and tried talking to her as

gently as possible. “Are you okay? You just got up, so why don’t I get you something to drink?”

“O-Okay...”

Once she calmed herself, Sofie took a seat and slowly sipped at her cup of tea. Figuring this was my chance, I decided to broach the subject...

“When you said you didn’t have anywhere to go, what did you mean?”

“Exactly that,” she answered. “Princess Leyfa has dismissed me from service. She said she was done with a worthless retainer like me.”

“Why would she say that...?”

“Because I truly am worthless. I let you escape, I acted out of line, and I lost to that Miya woman...”

“Miya?!” I raised my voice at the familiar name.

Roslia, who was beside me, similarly raised an eyebrow. “What’s Miya got to do with this?”

“You know her...?” Sofie asked.

“Well, yeah...” I had to stop myself there. I’d immediately assumed there was a connection somehow, but Sofie seemed oblivious to the fact that we knew each other.

“She’s Note’s childhood friend,” Roslia explained. “They used to adventure together.”

“I see. So you really were behind this...” Sofie muttered.

Jeez, she didn’t have to glower at me like that! I had no idea what Miya was up to. I was totally uninvolved. I hadn’t even seen her since we returned to Puriff.

“I was not! Miya and I go way back, but we’re out of touch. I couldn’t tell you what she’s doing right now,” I volunteered. “So, what happened with her?”

Whether or not it had anything to do with Sofie, I wanted to know what Miya had gotten herself into. We may have promised not to see each other until one

of us conquered the dungeon, but she was still my childhood friend. I couldn't help being curious.

"She dropped by out of the blue and asked to join Her Highness's party. Princess Leyfa was in a foul mood and agreed on the condition that she defeat me in battle. I lost, and so I was kicked out to make room..."

"That's...unfortunate."

Okay, so maybe this did kinda come back on me after all. I was the one who'd challenged Miya to try her hand at dungeon conquest, meaning I was indirectly the reason she'd gone to Leyfa.

"Miya's only into dungeon diving because of you, right?" Roslia piped up. "You bear some of the blame here, Note."

Did she really have to go and say that, though? I was already kicking myself, and now Sofie was *really* glaring daggers at me. Worse yet...

"That woman again..." Erin mumbled to herself with a sour look on her face.

No, you've all got the wrong idea!

"I swear, she always turns up at the worst time," huffed Roslia.

I had to agree with her there. Miya had reappeared just when we were about to resume adventuring. Then she popped up again just as we set out to reform the Arrivers. And now here she was to stir the waters once more after I'd settled my score with Leyfa. I was sure Miya meant no harm, but there was no denying her terrible timing. It was like we were on opposite wavelengths or something.

But all that aside, this meant she was joining up with Princess Leyfa, huh? I had to wonder how that would turn out. Okay, I'll admit I was a little worried. Leyfa was just so...charming...after all.

"So, what are you going to do now if you can't go back to the princess?" I asked Sofie.

"I..." She struggled for words, lowering her head and clenching her fists on the table.

"What were you doing last night?" Erin asked her out of curiosity. "You lost

your fight earlier in the day, right?”

“I don’t know... I was just wandering around, and the next thing I knew, it was light out.”

“You were just wandering around...all night in the rain? Is that what you’re telling me?!”

Sofie nodded and quietly said, “Yes...”

“No wonder you came down with a fever! Honestly, what were you thinking?”

“I’m sorry...”

“Let it be, Erin. She wasn’t in her right mind.”

Sofie had told me how indebted she felt to Leyfa, who reached out to her after her fall from grace. She had happily sworn loyalty to the princess in return, but now that Leyfa was done with her, she’d heartlessly cast Sofie aside. I couldn’t even imagine what a shock that was, especially given how devoted Sofie was to the princess.

“So...why did you decide to come after me?” I had to ask.

“I hoped Her Highness would reconsider if I defeated you.”

“Wait, that means—”

Before I could finish, Sofie interrupted, “I’m sorry.”

I wasn’t after an apology, though. I was concerned about her lack of forethought. If she’d succeeded in killing me, the Headhunter would’ve immediately moved on Leyfa. Even if Sofie were acting on her own, it would have looked like Leyfa was behind it all. So killing me would’ve actually worked against Sofie immensely—it only would have enraged Leyfa more. Granted, she probably hadn’t had the presence of mind to process all that at the time.

“Do you have anywhere you can stay? Or the money to find somewhere?” I asked.

“I don’t know...” Sofie slowly shook her head. “I don’t remember bringing my things with me...”

Having no belongings and no money put her in quite a tight spot. She’d only

just come to town too, so I doubted she had any connections here she could rely on. Moreover, even though she was conscious now, she was still feverishly ill. We couldn't just let her leave like this.

"You should rest here until you feel better," I offered. "Heading out in this condition would be dangerous."

"You don't need to worry about me." Sofie shook her head again. "I don't have a reason to live anymore, so I frankly don't care what happens to me from here."

"Don't say that..."

"Let me remind you that I'm your enemy. You have no business helping me."

Even if that was technically true, it didn't change how I felt. I wasn't going to turn her out under the circumstances.

"Listen, it's getting late," I said. "You should at least stay the night here."

"I couldn't possibly—"

"It'd be a waste for you to kick the bucket after we worked so hard to save you. Besides, your clothes aren't even dry yet."

Sofie stared at her shirt, taking a moment to appreciate the fact that she was in clothes not her own, then slowly closed her eyes. "Understood... Rather, please allow me to stay here until my clothes are ready. I'll leave tomorrow."

With that, she meekly shrank into herself.

*

The next day, I got out of bed and went downstairs to find Sofie searching for her clothes. Personally, I didn't think she'd be in such a rush to get out of here. There was no way she was back up to speed already. After we talked last night, she'd eaten the porridge Erin made for her and then passed right back out. I could tell her fever and fatigue were taking a toll, because she'd been groaning in her sleep.

"Leaving so soon?" I asked.

"Yes..." she said quietly.

“Maybe you should rest a little—” Even as I was saying that, Sofie was swaying on her feet. Her flushed face told me she was still feverish. “Are you okay?”

“I told you I won’t cause you any more trouble...”

“I wouldn’t call this trouble. I mean, certainly not compared to showing up on my doorstep and trying to kill me, y’know?”

“I’m really sorry about that...”

My lighthearted joke was met with an earnest apology. It made me feel bad for even bringing it up, which was awkward...

“Where are you going to go now?” I asked next. “You’re from the capital, right?”

“Yes.”

“Are you headed back there, then? Do you need to borrow some money for the trip? You don’t have any on you, do you?”

“You don’t need to go that far... You’ve helped me enough already...”

“But what are you going to do without money?”

“I should still have some at the hotel, I think...”

So she’s planning on going back to Leyfa...

Honestly, I didn’t think it was a good idea for Sofie to see Leyfa in her current condition. The princess had cast her out without any regard for her well-being. Seeing her like this wasn’t going to stir up any sympathy. It’d just give the princess another occasion to treat her like dirt.

“Okay, then I’ll go with you.”

“Why...?”

“I’m too worried to let you go on your own when you’re this sick.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“I also want to talk to Miya.”

On one hand, Miya and I were rivals who’d sworn not to see each other again

until one of us cleared the dungeon. But on the other, we were childhood friends. I wanted to prevent her from becoming the princess's next pawn if I could at all help it.

"So since we're headed the same way, I'll go with you. It'd be awkward for me to run into Princess Leyfa alone anyway. I'd appreciate the company."

In reality, I was far more worried about Sofie than I was Miya—but if I said that out loud, she'd probably shoot me down on the spot. As such, Miya made the perfect excuse.

"Fine..." Sofie relented, seeming to accept it. "And thanks," she added.

Okay, never mind. She'd seen right through me. Well, it didn't really matter. As long as I was with her, I could keep Sofie from doing anything rash like spending the night out in the rain.

"Welp, how about some breakfast before we leave?" I offered.

"But I shouldn't..."

"I don't want to go on an empty stomach, and Princess Leyfa would probably turn you away at the door if you came knocking at this hour."

Sofie looked out the window. A light fog covered the town, and the sun was just barely starting to rise.

"Oh..." she muttered, finally seeming to realize the silliness of leaving so early.

Yeah, there was no way she was back to health yet. She was barely thinking straight. I definitely couldn't let her go see Leyfa alone in this state.

The Worst Combination

So Leyfa and Miya are on the other side of this door, huh...?

It was now just before noon. Some time after we ate breakfast, Sofie and I had departed for the hotel. Since we were moving at Sofie's compromised pace, however, the twenty-minute trip took a whole hour. Her forehead was now drenched with sweat.

"You okay? Shall we rest a little?" I called over to check up on her.

"No. I'm fine," she replied, shaking her head.

She didn't seem particularly fine, but arguing with her would only put more strain on her. I figured it was best to get our business over with ASAP so she could go back to resting.

"All right. Here we go then..."

I rang the doorbell to the hotel room. After a moment's wait, someone approached the door from the other side.

"Yes? Who is it?" called a bright voice. Hearing it brought back memories, both from the distant past and from just a few short months ago. When the door opened, I saw a familiar blonde half-elf. "Ack! Note?!"

Wait, "Ack"? What kind of a reaction was that?! That's not how you're supposed to greet an old friend you haven't seen in a while. I had half a mind to let Miya have it, but I held back. This wasn't the time to bicker. I wanted to avoid causing any trouble here.

"Long time no see, Miya," I said, greeting her with the biggest smile I could muster.

She replied, "Hmm? Didn't we agree not to see each other again until one of us cleared the dungeon? Oh, I know! You missed me too much, didn't you?"

Annoying. Absolutely insufferable. What was she so giddy about? Miya was stupidly grinning from ear to ear, so I ignored her and turned to Sofie.

“She’s pissing me off. Can I punch her just once?”

“WHY?! That’s so mean, Note!” Miya protested with tears in her eyes.

Ugh, I had to get a hold of myself. I wasn’t here to fight with Miya. I needed to get to the point.

“I need to ask you something, Miya. Is it true that you’re joining Leyfa’s party?”

Miya nodded, still grinning. “Yup!”

“Wait, really...?”

“What? Is there a problem with that?”

Honestly, there were multiple problems. Miya innocently cocked her head to the side, however. I couldn’t sense that she had any ulterior motives. She was blissfully ignorant.

“Oh, I get it!” she cried. “You’re jealous I’m joining up with the princess, aren’t you?! So you came to whine about it!”

I was stunned into silence. She was so amazingly wrong that my jaw hit the floor in disbelief. Sofie was similarly getting fed up too.

“You don’t get it at all, Miya. They call her the Tyrant Princess for a reason. You should stay away from her.” I grabbed Miya by the shoulders and tried to shake some sense into her. I could feel Sofie’s reproachful glare on me, but I paid her no mind. “I’m telling you this for your own good, you hear me?”

“Well, excuse me! Don’t you think you’re being a bit rude?” a voice called from further inside the room. It was proud. Oppressive, even. And it belonged to none other than the aforementioned Tyrant Princess, Leyfa Southerndall. “We agreed not to interfere with each other’s business, didn’t we? So what are you doing here, telling one of my party members what to do? Doesn’t that go against our little deal?”

“But—”

“No buts. Unless you disagree, of course.”

Unfortunately, I couldn’t argue. Leyfa was absolutely right. I’d used the

Headhunter as leverage to force her into a truce—a noninterference pact. Miya may have been my childhood friend, but that didn't mean I could try to stop her from joining Leyfa's party. It would go against our agreement.

"Huh? Princess Leyfa, do you and Note know each other?" Miya asked innocently, oblivious to our history.

"I should be the one asking you that," Leyfa replied. "How do *you* know each other?"

"Remember the childhood friend I said I wanted to beat up yesterday? This is him!"

What the hell was she saying about me behind my back...? I was curious, but I also didn't want to know.

"My, what a coincidence. Note Athlon also happens to be the man I said I despise to death."

"Seriously?! That makes us, like, best friends!" Miya squealed, holding her hand up for a high-five.

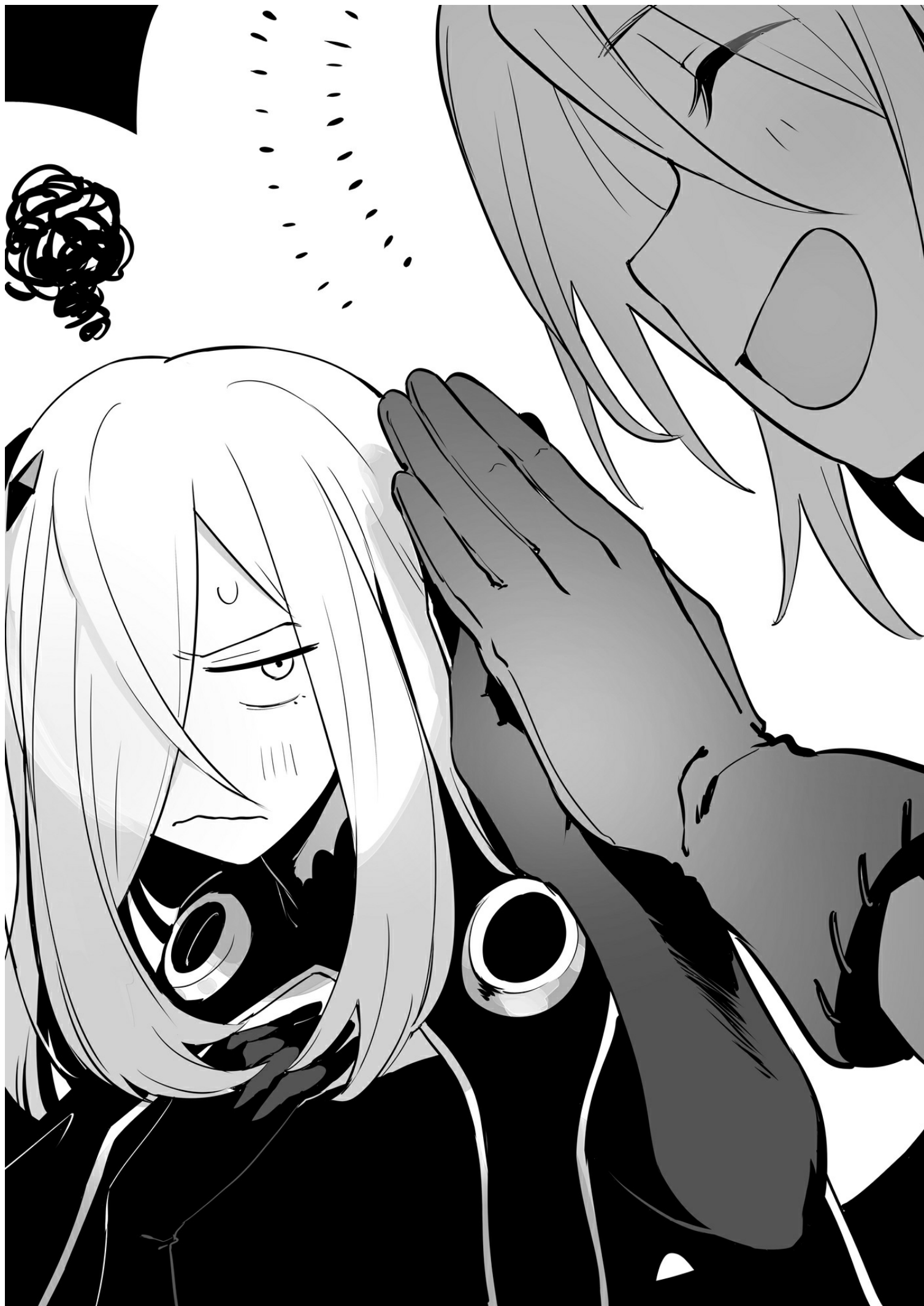
Leyfa faltered, then cleared her throat. "So that's how it is. Miya Line is with me now."

"Hey, c'mon! High-five!"

"Er, must I?"

"Yeah!"

"So be it..." Bowled over by Miya's energy, Leyfa reluctantly tapped her raised hand.



She then whipped around and barked at me, “What are you ogling?”

“Oh, nothing. I was just noticing how red your face is.”

“Shut up! Not another word!”

Maybe I was pushing her buttons a little too much... The plan wasn't to upset her here. I had to watch myself.

That aside, Miya was pretty fearless in front of the Tyrant Princess, huh? I hadn't been able to picture it before, but maybe they actually made a good pair after all. Cold, calculating Leyfa and carefree, spirited Miya... They were like polar opposites that balanced out pretty well.

Wait, Miya wasn't really why I was here! I'd almost forgotten Sofie.

“Listen, Your Highness, we're actually here about your knight...”

When I turned to look at Sofie, Leyfa's face turned even colder.

“What, you're here too? I didn't notice you at all,” she hissed. “Come to think of it, didn't I tell you never to show your face again? Did I not make myself clear?”

Sofie's whole body flinched. To hear such cruel words from someone she'd sworn her life to... No wonder she was so shocked.

“Hey, you don't have to go that far, do you? Sofie did her best—”

“Outsiders should stay out of this!” Leyfa snapped angrily.

When she put it that way, I couldn't really argue. Miya likewise watched on with nervous uncertainty.

“You know I scorn people who cannot achieve results, don't you?” the princess asked.

“Yes...” Sofie meekly replied.

“And have you achieved anything?”

“No...”

“So you understand what follows, don't you?”

“I do...”

“You know I normally dispose of the people I discard, right? That’s because they pose a problem for me if they decide to turn on me. I made a special exception for you in that regard already. What more do you want from me?”

“Nothing...” Sofie was unable to ask for anything. “I’m sorry, Your Highness...”

Overwhelmed by Leyfa’s aggression, she just quietly backed down. If I didn’t cut in, Sofie would be left adrift again. So I steeled myself and spoke up.

“Are you sure, Sofie? Do you really want to back down here?”

Sofie shook her head, then cried, “Princess Leyfa, I beg of you! Please give me one more chance!”

“Ugh, you’re so loud.”

“Please, Your Highness!”

“Don’t touch me!”

Leyfa slapped Sofie’s hand away. It lingered in the air for a moment with nowhere to go.

“Your Highness...”

“Shut up! I’m through with you. Begone.”

“Please! I’ll do anything you ask of me!”

“I told you to disappear. If you want to do something for me so badly, then get out of my sight already.”

“Wh...”

Sofie’s face was already as white as a sheet. I couldn’t just stand back on this.

“Isn’t that a little too harsh? You could hear her out a little—”

“I said outsiders should stay out of this! Did you not hear me?”

We glared at each other. I opened my mouth to say something, but Sofie beat me to it...

“It’s fine,” she murmured quietly.

“What?!” I gasped.

“That’s enough already...” There, she turned to Leyfa and bowed her head.
“I’m sorry for causing such a fuss.”

“But Sofie...”

“I’ll take my leave now, Your Highness, but may I retrieve my things first?”

“Do what you want,” Leyfa replied disinterestedly, disappearing back inside the room.

I could see Sofie’s fists trembling. She scrunched up her face in an attempt to hold back the tears...and I was powerless to help her. I’d brought her here in hopes of making things better, but she was worse off now than before. If I’d known this was how it was going to turn out, I would’ve forced her to stay and rest at HQ. She never should have come to see Leyfa...

That was all I could think when I saw how grief-stricken Sofie was.

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After we collected Sofie’s belongings, we put the hotel behind us. She was still in pretty rough shape, so I was carrying her things for her.

“Isn’t that heavy? I can carry it,” she offered.

“I can’t let an invalid carry this,” I argued.

“It’s fine. I’m better already.”

Or so she said, but she sure didn’t look the part. In fact, she seemed even worse for wear than when we’d first left HQ. Maybe I’d let her push herself too much. Her bangs were damp with sweat, and I could see her eyes sometimes go out of focus.

“Really, I’m fine,” she insisted. “You don’t have to bother with me any more.”

“Say what you will, but—”

“There’s no need for you to worry about me, Note.”

Sure, I had no obligation to give a damn about what happened to her. But I wasn’t heartless.

“I can’t just send you on your way in this condition. What are you going to do? I feel like if I leave you here, you’ll drop dead on the street.”

“Drop dead, huh? That doesn’t sound too bad...”

“How could you say that? You’ve gotta have a reason to carry on.”

“No, nothing of the sort,” she muttered. “Princess Leyfa was my everything! She picked me up when I had no one! My sole purpose in life was repaying that debt!”

What a twisted raison d’être... That was all I could think.

“But now even that’s been torn from me! I have no reason to live anymore!”

Sofie’s twisted *raison d’être* was her last tether to purpose, and now that had been severed. There was nothing left to keep her going. Looking at it objectively, staking your purpose in life on someone else is a bad idea. It creates dependence.

Sofie probably had her reasons for living the way she did, though. She’d lost her entire family. She’d lost her status as noble along with the good graces of society. I’d never been through anything like that. I had no idea how painful it was. I’d never understand the despair she was feeling right now...

But I might be able to do something about it—that was the thought that crossed my mind. Even if I couldn’t understand why she sought death, even if it was only temporary, I might be able to give her another reason to live. That flash of inspiration had me opening my mouth before I realized it.

“Say, in that case, why don’t you come dungeon diving with us?”

“What?”

“Errr, how should I explain this...? At one point in my life, I didn’t think I had a reason to live either. In my case though, it was just because I’d gotten dumped. I know, right? How dramatic can you be? Still, at the time, that girl meant everything to me.”

I hardly knew what I was saying.

“But my life changed when I joined up with the Arrivers and tried dungeon diving. I put my past behind me and found a new reason to live. It might sound strange, but the dungeon has that kind of power.”

In spite of myself, I couldn’t stop.

“So I think you should give it a try too. What do you say? Want to wipe the dungeon out with us? It’s not an easy life, and I can’t guarantee you’ll find happiness. You’ll constantly be in danger, but every day will be so hectic that you’ll forget about all the bad stuff in no time.”

“What are you saying...?”

Sofie was understandably leery. Even I knew what I was saying was crazy.

“I’m only half sure myself, but I can promise you this much... There’s no fun like dungeon runs.”

“Are you out of your mind, by any chance?”

Maybe I was. Why was I trying to recruit her in this situation? It was like the dungeon was all I could think of. Erin had even once called me a dungeon-obsessed weirdo.

“Our party just so happens to be down a member right now. Would you be interested in taking the spot? If you don’t have anything else to live for, that should do for now. It’ll probably be a more productive experience than just keeling over.”

I was just desperately running off at the mouth, but I found my thoughts wandering to someone I’d met while helping out the Labyrinth Knights. It was their star warrior, Blaeu, who’d sought death in the dungeon ever since losing his comrades to it. Surely his current party members didn’t want to see him die, yet they continued to adventure with him anyway. They had to be hoping he’d come to change his mind over time. Was it wrong for me to wish the same for Sofie?

I looked at her nervously. She had a faint—so faint that it was barely detectable—smile on her face.

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re odd?” she asked.

“Recently, yeah, I get that a lot...”

It was funny. I never used to hear it. Something had changed after I joined the Arrivers.

“I was your enemy. I kidnapped one of your teammates. I even stabbed you

with my sword. Yet you'd still invite me into your party?"

"Well, yeah? I'm not really concerned about all that."

"I lost to that elf woman. I'm not that strong. I might not be of any use."

"That's not true. You're plenty strong. Miya's just a monster. Don't let her get to you."

I'd gotten a taste of Sofie's strength firsthand when we met. Her abilities were the real deal—as expected of a knight who'd spent years in Leyfa's service. There were only a handful of people in this country who could stand up to Miya in a fight, let alone beat her. Sofie had no reason to take it personally.

"So, will you join the Arrivers?" I asked again.

Sofie fell silent. Her gaze was fixed on the ground.

"Please," I said. "Think of it as helping us out."

That seemed to clinch things. She looked up at me and said, "I owe you for saving me. I believe I should at least return the favor."

"Nah, you don't owe—"

"It's important to me. Repaying my debts, I mean. I'm not one of those miserable ingrates..." I had no idea what she was talking about, but I could see sincerity in her eyes when she said it. "If your party is in need and there's something I can do about it, I want to help. I still don't understand what you said about living for it or doing it for fun... But if I can return the favor by trying my hand at the dungeon, then that's what I'll do."

"That's as good a start as any. You can figure the rest out as you go."

I had no proof of that. It was just optimism on my part, but I believed it would happen one day. That's why I could say it with confidence.

"It's a promise then, Sofie. Please don't talk about dying anymore."

"Fine... I promise." Sofie nodded slowly.

It felt kind of strange, even to me. We *had* started out as enemies. Like Leyfa, I hadn't found Sofie very pleasant to be around. But now, after a strange twist of fate, I was asking her to join the party. I guess it wasn't such a bad idea...

Finding a party member through an odd connection, that is.

Based on our conversations until now, I knew Sofie wasn't a bad person. She'd just been loyal to a bad princess. It was that simple. It was a little *too* simplistic, actually, but compared to the other Arrivers, Sofie was downright normal. Erin and Roslia were way more of a handful when they were upset about something.

"It's good to have you, Sofie. I can't wait to see where we go from here."

With the addition of a new member, the Arrivers would change. Whether it'd be for better or worse was anyone's guess, but I had a feeling Sofie would do well. I was strangely sure of that.

"Is this okay, though?" she asked.

"Is what okay?" I asked in turn.

"For you to decide this on your own. Shouldn't you discuss it with your party members first?"

"..."

"Why aren't you saying anything?"

"Well, I was just thinking that you're totally right."

I'd overlooked that one crucial detail. This wasn't the kind of decision I could make for myself. It was something the entire party needed to vet. I was going to get chewed out big time...

"If it doesn't seem like it'll work out, it's fine... I can just disappear," Sofie offered.

"Nah, I'll figure out how to persuade them. Not to brag about it, but I'm pretty good at bending their ears. I know how to get away with a thing or two."

Considering the stunts I'd pulled vis-à-vis the Leyfa incident, it was definitely more than "a thing or two." But the devil's in the details. I made my declaration boldly so Sofie wouldn't worry.

"Pfft. What's with you? You're so weird," Sofie giggled.

I was lured into smiling along.

Life never goes smoothly. Not for me, not for Sofie, not for anyone. But we all have to keep living. We have to keep moving forward, because giving up midway just means an early end. The Arrivers had failed to conquer the dungeon once before, but we were going to succeed this time. Without losing anyone.

And so the new Arrivers, now complete with a sixth member, resumed our dream conquest.



Afterword

Hello, everyone. Long time no see. Udon Kamono here.

It's been another five months, I believe? How did you like this volume? This story actually picks up again in volume 7. In other words, this is just the first half. That's why the focus was on Sofie joining the party rather than dungeon diving. The somewhat incomplete ending was intentional, is what I'm trying to say...

Yeah... I actually wanted to include the contents of volume 7 in this book too...

It's just that, as I was writing, I realized there was a lot more that I wanted to cover than I originally intended. And so I passed the buck to my future self by leaving the second half of the arc for next time. Oops, I shouldn't say that. I should say that I determined it would be best to leave the events to follow for the next volume. I didn't actually pass any bucks—don't worry! You can look forward to the Arrivers going dungeon diving with their new recruit next time.

Now for the acknowledgments. Shizuki, thank you as always for your lovely artwork. I'm moved every time your illustrations arrive. The color picture of Erin in the front of the book is wonderful! Editor Soyama, thank you for listening to my various woes. I minded my page count for this volume...but it ended up being a two-parter, so it kind of evens out!

And finally, to my readers, thank you for following this story across six volumes. I promised in the last book that we'd get to dungeon diving this time, but I ended up breaking that promise. You shouldn't trust me too much. I think we'll hit the dungeon for real next time, but a sudden school story or tournament arc could pop up instead. Better take what you hear here with a grain of salt. (Of course that won't happen! Don't worry!) Hope to see you again in the next one.

-Udon Kamono

Miya Line

Nickname _____

Gear

Bow

Party

The Princess's
Legion



Role

Hunter

Skills

Protection of the Forest Spirit King

Rarity: SR (Super Rare)

Slot Cost: 1

Effect: The ability to use earth, wind, and water elemental spirit magic. Also increases magical abilities in forest areas. Elf exclusive skill.

Bow Mastery - Superior

Rarity: UR (Ultra Rare)

Slot Cost: 1

Effect: Grants the maximum aptitude for bow mastery.

Physical Boost - Major

Rarity: SR (Super Rare)

Slot Cost: 1

Effect: Greatly increases physical abilities.

Spells
& Arts

Esmeralda-Viento-Tempestad

A destructive wide-range spirit art.

Borrows the power of the wind elemental Esmeralda to create a localized storm.

Dreadnaught Flash

One of the strongest bow-based arts.

Let fly a single extremely powerful shot by pulling the bowstring as far back as possible. Takes time to activate.

Mapping:

The Trash-Tier Skill

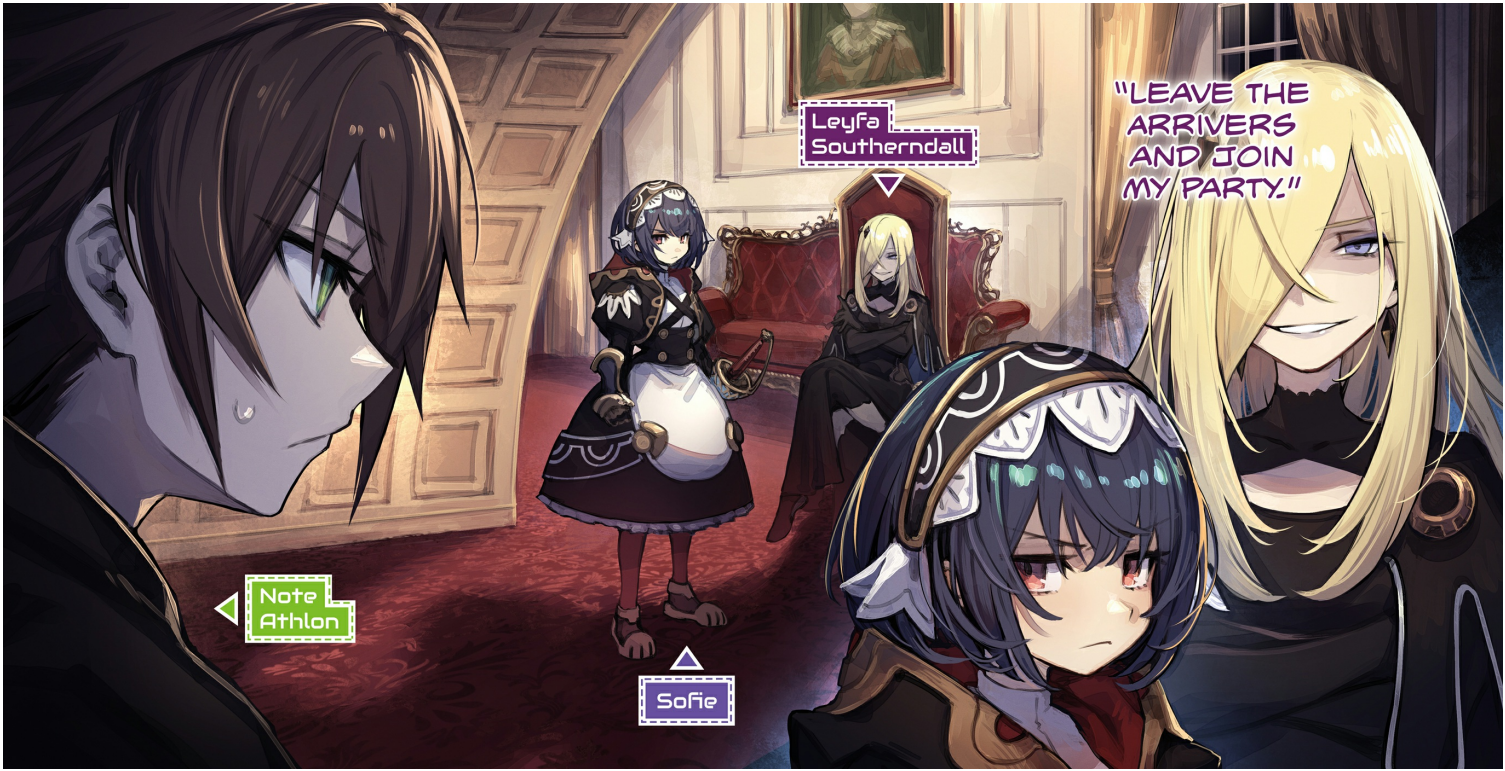
✕ That Got Me Into a
🔒 Top-Tier Party

6

III. Hitomi Shizuki

Udon Kamono







"THIS
IS TOTALLY
EMBARRASSING,
SO DON'T
LOOK..."

Erin
Fortlord

Bonus Short Stories

Frenemies

“Hey, Roslia, what’s Note’s childhood friend really like?” Erin asked out of the blue while we were resting.

The two of us were currently in the middle of a loot run in the dungeon. We’d cleaned up most of the monsters already, so we were taking a little breather.

“Why bring that up now?” I asked back.

“Because I’m curious. She was Note’s first love, right? He said nothing happened between them, but I want to know what she’s like.”

This was probably about the conversation we’d had back at HQ the other day. Erin seemed extremely curious about Miya. I suppose I’d feel the same if I were in her position. She was in love with Note, after all. It was perfectly normal for her to feel awkward about him reuniting with his first crush while she wasn’t around. Still...just out and telling her the truth would be boring, so I decided to have a little fun.

“Why don’t you ask Note yourself? He knows her a lot better than I do,” I said.

“I know that. But it’s hard to ask him directly... I don’t want to seem like I’m nagging him or like I’m being nosy or anything.”

“Don’t worry. The fact that you’re asking someone else instead *definitely* makes you nosy.”

“I hate that I can’t argue with that...”

Erin balled her hands into fists. I actually liked the way she always wore her heart on her sleeve. It made her so easy to tease. At the end of the day, I was pretty fond of Erin—though I’d never admit that to her face.

“So, what kind of girl is she?” she asked again. “Stop beating around the bush

and tell me.”

“Bug me all you want, but I don’t feel comfortable talking about my acquaintances behind their backs. We adventured together for a while, so it’d feel like selling out a sister-in-arms.”

“I mean, I get it, but it’s infuriating to hear that from *you* of all people...”

“Tee hee!”

“Are you messing with me right now?”

“You only just noticed?”

“Can I hit you with one spell?”

“Nopers!”

“I’m gonna wring your neck!”

Gee, what was her problem? All I’d done was give her a peace sign and stick out my tongue, and now she was all mad at me! Just kidding. I knew good and well why she was pissed without being told. Tee hee!

“Hurry up and spill it already. Otherwise I really will get steamed,” she threatened.

“You already look pretty steamed to me...”

“Did you say something?”

“Nope, nothing. I’ll tell you everything you want to know about Miya.”

It seemed she was reaching her limit. Teasing Erin was fun, but I had to make sure I toed the line rather than crossed it. She wasn’t the most rational person, so there was no telling what she’d do when she flipped her lid. At worst, she might actually cast a spell on me. (I’d nearly died in such a fashion thrice before.) “Let’s see...” I said. “First off, Miya has an utterly horrible personality.”

“You said you don’t like talking about people behind their backs, but you open with that?! You clearly love gossiping!”

“No, seriously. She looks like she’s all full of innocent rainbows and sunshine, but once you get to know her? That girl’s as dark as can be on the inside.”

“That doesn’t help your case at all! If you’re calling her two-faced, isn’t that worse?!”

“She’s trouble, to say the least. Note was right to distance himself from her.”

“She must be pretty bad if even *you’re* saying that about her, huh?”

“You don’t need to worry, though. She’s got a big ol’ target painted on her.”

“She what?!”

You do too, Erin. Basically, you’re both easy marks.

“Fine...” she relented. “I guess that explains her personality. What about her looks? Is she cute?”

“Are you that curious?”

“Of course I am! I’ll be more concerned if she is...” she said, twirling her hair around her finger.

Erin really was interesting. I couldn’t help teasing her when she acted like this.

“Rest assured, she’s way cuter than you.”

“There’s nothing assuring about that whatsoever!”

“It’s okay. I mean, she’s not nearly as cute as me.”

“So cuter than me, but not as cute as you, huh? Wait, you’re saying you’re cuter than me!”

“What? You thought it was the other way around?”

“Wh-Why are you giving me that look, Roslia?”

“You’re entitled to your own opinion, of course. It’s good to be confident in your looks.”

“That’s not what we’re talking about here! I’m just annoyed that you assume I’m the ugly one!”

“Oh, gosh, no. You’re way too cute for that. I don’t hold a candle to you. Nope, not me.”

“I hate you!” Erin shouted, stamping her foot on the ground. It was perfect.

Ah, this was the life. Being able to banter back and forth like this made me so happy we'd reformed the Arrivers. I may have joined the party for Note, but nowadays I found myself enjoying spending time with the other members as well. That was still too embarrassing to admit out loud, though.

The Princess and Her New Hire

"Wow, I never imagined you knew Note, Leyfa!"

"I could say the same for you," sighed the princess.

Now that Note Athlon and Sofie had departed, she was left alone with Miya Line. The half-elf had appeared seemingly out of nowhere, demanded to join the party, and then demonstrated overwhelming strength in a landslide victory over Sofie. Leyfa had agreed to accept Miya because of her incredible abilities, but her incredibly overfamiliar antics were rubbing the princess the wrong way.

"To think we both hate the same guy... Like, could we be any more perfect for each other?!"

"Listen here, you." The princess had so far overlooked Miya's attitude, but she would brook it no longer. She held a hand to her forehead as she warned the half-elf, "We need to get one thing straight."

"What?" Miya asked.

"You're being a little... No, you're being heinously rude."

"You think so?" Miya cocked her head to the side. She seemed oblivious to the matter.

"That's exactly what I'm talking about! You should have said, 'I beg your forgiveness, Your Highness!'"

"Hmm..."

"Why are you acting like that's incomprehensible to you?!"

"I just don't really get it..."

"First of all, I am a princess! A member of the royal family! You are required to be polite with me!"

“I am, though!”

“See?! More backtalk!”

Leyfa was so frustrated that she felt a headache coming on. She’d felt no remorse about Sofie out, but perhaps letting this airheaded elf in was a mistake. She was struck with a twinge of regret.

“I’m just bad at all that stuffy formal talk. Maybe it’s ’cause I grew up in the country. I’m just sort of naturally down to earth.”

“I’ll have you know that Note Athlon came from the very same village and he’s perfectly capable of speaking respectfully.”

“Hey, good point!”

“Moreover, you’ve long since emerged from the countryside.”

“Aw, don’t worry. We don’t have to stand on ceremony.”

“That’s for the person of higher social standing to decide!”

Could this possibly be part of Note Athlon’s scheme? Had he sent this infiltrator to annoy the princess to death? Miya was so uncontrollably irritating that Leyfa had to wonder.

“Hey, we’re about the same age,” she said. “So let’s be friends, okay?”

“I will remind you again—I *am* a princess.”

“Yeah, but calling you ‘Princess’ is just so stiff. I know! You’re ‘Leyfie’ from now on.”

“I will have you beheaded if you address me by that name.”

“Awww, but I haven’t even gotten to use it once yet!”

“You’d be wise never to use it at all.”

Leyfa’s headache was developing into a full-on migraine. It was common in stories for the sheltered princess revered by all to encounter a main character who breaches her icy heart by treating her in the same warm, friendly manner as everyone else—but it didn’t work like that in real life. Being on the receiving end of such impertinent behavior was infuriating.

“Do you even know what they call me on the streets?” Leyfa asked darkly.

“Leyfie?” Miya guessed.

“The Tyrant Princess! They call me the Tyrant Princess!”

Leyfa was well aware that her nickname was spoken in fear, and she preferred it that way. The Tyrant Princess was a wonderful title. What was wrong with being a tyrant? For someone willing to do whatever it took to claim the throne, it suited her perfectly.

“You have some nerve to try to make friends with the Tyrant Princess, girl,” Leyfa hissed.

“I guess so!” Miya replied, undaunted. “This might surprise you, but I wasn’t nearly this friendly with my last party.”

“That certainly is hard to believe...”

“It’s because of everything that happened with Note. I lied about my skills and kept my distance from other people.”

“What’s your point?”

“Putting up a barrier like that hurt my fellow party members. They saw me as a teammate, but I didn’t think of them the same way. That got to me, you know? I realized how horrible I’d been to them.” The girl in front of Leyfa continued with a smile, “That’s why I decided I would make friends with my next party, like a real team. So your nickname doesn’t matter to me. I have every intention of being your friend regardless.”

“That’s not a good reason to be so overly familiar with royalty... You’re an odd one indeed.”

“Yeah, I get that a lot!”

It seemed Miya was tough, if not impenetrable. Leyfa saw no point in arguing with her further. Try as she might to warn her, this girl wouldn’t relent. Pressing her any more would be pointless.

“Fine then. Call me whatever you’d like,” she sighed.

“Okay, how about ‘Leyfa the Tyrant’—or Leyfant for short!”

“I take it back. You may only address me as Princess Leyfa.”

Give this girl an inch and she’d take a mile.

What Happened in the Dressing Room, Continued

“What should we do...?”

“I dunno...”

Things were awkward between me and Erin. This was no surprise, mind you. We’d just been shopping in a boutique where one thing led to another and things got a little heated in the dressing room...right up until the shop attendant caught us and gave us an earful.

“F-For now, wanna walk around some more? It’s still a little soon to go home.”

“Y-Yeah, let’s do that!”

That being said, awkwardness wasn’t a good reason to end our date early. This was a rare opportunity for me to spend time with Erin alone. It’d be a waste to squander it. We walked along in silence for a while.

“It’s kinda unfair, isn’t it?” Erin finally asked, looking down at the ground.

“Huh? What is?” I asked back.

“You got to see me undressed.”

“Yeah...”

“So you got a look for free.”

“Yeah, I guess I did.”

“Isn’t that unfair?”

Um...was it? I could see how she might think that way, but we’d only ended up in that predicament because of her. I mean, she’d dragged me into the dressing room with her. I hadn’t really had a choice in the matter.

Erin waved her hands in a fluster before I could defend myself. “That’s not what I meant!” she said. “I’m not mad about it or anything!”

“Then what *did* you mean?”

“That it would only be fair...if I get a look too...”

I fell completely speechless. Never in my wildest dreams had I thought she’d say— *Wait, what? Is she saying she wants to see me undressed too? I can’t keep up at all... Does this mean Erin has those kinds of thoughts too? So girls get urges as well...* My head was addled with all kinds of adolescent questions.

“Um, so...” she mumbled.

“So what...?”

“Let’s go to a men’s dressing room next!”

“Why?!” I was once again baffled by what she said. This time, I decided to ask for clarification. “What does me seeing you naked have to do with a men’s dressing room?!”

“You saw me naked in the dressing room, no?”

“Yeah, I suppose...”

“So now it’s your turn.”

“Can I just remind you of one thing, Erin?” I took a deep breath before saying what was really on my mind. “That is *not* what dressing rooms are meant for!”

Turning the Tables?!

We were all lazing about in the living room after dinner one night when...

“Neme just realized something incredible!” Neme declared, suddenly rising to her feet.

Just what had she realized? I was curious, but based on past experience, it wasn’t going to be anything near as interesting as she made it sound.

Knowing that herself, Erin still asked, “What’s so incredible?”

“Listen and be amazed!”

“Yeah, yeah, get on with it.”

“Everyone says Neme is bad with strangers, right?”

She was talking about her timid nature. She always blunted it by insisting she was “just a little bad with strangers,” but I’d never heard anyone else describe it that generously.

“Yeah, maybe... So what?” Erin urged her to continue with an unimpressed look.

“Well, recently, Neme’s made more friends! There’s Fourie and Nacht, Lila and Leys. See? That’s four friends!” Neme counted them off on her fingers.

I couldn’t deny the fact that Neme had more friends now than she used to. After the Arrivers disbanded, she’d built up her own circle. It was honestly commendable.

“So Neme’s badness with strangers has been cured a bit!”

“Do you hear how awkward that is to say? Just say you’re shy.”

“Neme’s not shy! I’m just a little bad with strangers!”

Didn’t you just say you’d been cured of your “badness with strangers”? You’re basically admitting it’s not really any better... There was plenty I could have said in the moment, but I decided to restrain myself out of respect for Neme’s growth.

“Sure. Arguing with you would be a pain, so let’s just go with that,” Erin said with a shrug. “But making friends isn’t the same thing as getting over being timid. You’re only shy around strangers until they’re your friends, after all, so those are two separate matters entirely.”

“N-No one asked for your opinion!” Neme protested, pointing her finger at Erin. “Besides, you don’t have any friends! Neme has four, so I know a lot more about friendship than you!”

I could see Erin’s will to live blown right out of her body—in my head, of course, but that was the only way to describe how lifeless she looked.

“Ha ha, bet you can’t say anything back now!”

“I... I do too...have friends...” Erin replied, twitching like a fish out of water.

“Really?”

“Of course I do! I wouldn’t lie about that! It’d just make me feel hollow!”

“But I’ve never seen you go out on your days off. You’re always lying around here at home.”

“How I spend my days off is my choice! I’m just resting up for our next dungeon run! What’s wrong with that, huh?!”

“So when *do* you meet your friends?”

“That’s, well... They’re in Izaar! That’s right! They live back in my hometown!”

Now that I knew about Erin’s past, I could tell that was a blatant lie. What was it she’d said about feeling hollow...?

“Sounds fishy. What are they like, then?”

“What are they like...? I’ll tell you!” Erin cleared her throat and continued. “Let’s see, before the Seventh Sage Selection finals, one friend visited me to cheer me on. She even did my hair and makeup for me.”

“Oh, that sounds nice...”

“See? I told you I have friends.”

“What’s her name?”

“M-Marin.”

“That’s your sister!” I cut in.

Wait, I shouldn’t have— It was too late. I’d spoken up before I realized the damage I was doing.

Erin slowly turned to me with tears in her eyes. “You didn’t have to tell her that, Note...”

“Sorry, it was reflex...”

“Wait, Erin, you’re counting your sister as a friend? That’s just so...” Neme stifled a giggle.

Erin snapped back immediately, “Shut up! So what if I’m friends with my little sister?! Is there some law saying sisters *can’t* be friends?! Who decided that, huh?!”

“No one said—”

“That’s right! So I win! Got a problem?!”

“But if your sister is your only friend, I still have more, so Neme wins!”

Erin was completely stumped for an argument. Her eyes rolled back into her head as her soul escaped through her mouth. She sat there frozen for some time, then despondently wandered off down the hall in silence. I suspected she’d retreated to her room.

“Neme won an argument with Erin!” she cried triumphantly.

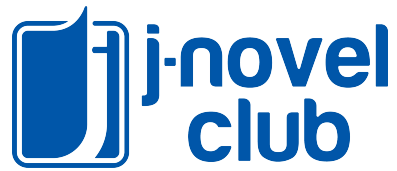
Sure, Erin may have picked the fight, but this was going too far. She was sensitive about the topic of friends. So in order to put Neme in her place, I added, “Four still isn’t a lot, you know?”

Later that evening...

“Tell me, Note! Why don’t I have any friends?! Is my personality that bad? Do people just naturally hate me?!”

“Not at all. I like you, Erin.”

I spent the whole night comforting our wailing mage.



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Mapping: The Trash-Tier Skill That Got Me Into a Top-Tier Party: Volume 6

by Udon Kamono

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Original Japanese edition published in 2020 by OVERLAP, Inc.

This English edition is published by arrangement with OVERLAP, Inc., Tokyo
English translation © 2021 J-Novel Club LLC

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Ebook edition 1.0: August 2021